

CHAPTER ONE

The realities of western societies

A glance before Islam

The Romans were engrossed during the Middle Ages in inventing means of torturing women to death for crimes they had not committed. Such methods of torture included pouring tar over their bodies, tying a woman's limbs to different horses, then allowing the animals to run in different directions until she was torn limb from limb, and tying a group of women to a post, then lighting fire beneath them and letting it burn for days as their flesh roasted and fell off.

Property

The people of Brahman India, China, the Germanic peoples and the barbarians of Europe allowed their woman neither to own property nor to inherit. Ancient Greece also followed essentially the same pattern, not allowing its girls to inherit from their parents unless they had no brothers. As for the Roman law, we have seen that it occasioned different types of treatment of women from one era to another. This demanding view of the woman has continued to prevail in numerous societies and cultures until very recent times.

In the book entitled 'Women in Islam and in Western Civilization', Jamil Bayham states:

Modern civilization held for a long time to the custom of allowing the man to take possession of his wife's money and to control how it was put to use, and to prevent her from disposing of it herself or concluding any sort of financial agreement without his permission. In fact, women enjoyed less legal ability after marriage than they did when they were still single. The law of France, which many would consider to be the "mother" of civilization, ruled that the man not only possessed the right to handle all property owned jointly by him and his wife, but that he held guardianship over his wife's private real estate as well. A wife was not allowed to give wealth away, sell, mortgage (real estate), deposit property as security, purchase, or accept a gift without her husband's written permission. Even in the event of her husband's absence, a wife was not allowed to sell so much as a small portion of their joint property, nor even to dispose of her own wealth without his approval. In addition, whereas the wife was not permitted to accept any sort of gift without her husband's consent, the husband had the right to give away any of their jointly owned household effects, as well as moveable property that belonged solely to her. In the main, the law of France in effect today requires the wife to obey her husband, to live with him wherever he wishes and to obtain his permission for anything she wishes to do, even if it involves something like attending a court session. Only in the event that she herself has been accused of some crime or violation would it be permissible for her to respond to a summons to appear in court without her husband's permission.ⁱ

Only by the late nineteenth century did the situation begin to improve in English law. Women in the US waited as late as the twentieth century before the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1945) finally put women on a par with men and stated that: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Yet today, the West, (having forgotten their own histories and struggles of equality), are quick to select Islamic Laws, such as the concept of 'hijab' and 'polygamy' and criticise them without any background knowledge.

Turning to Islam

Yvonne Ridley, the reporter who was captured by the Taliban in October 2001, embraced Islam after studying the Qur'an. Let me refer to her article which was published in Q-News.

My Journey to Islam

Islam is by far the most misunderstood religion in the world today thanks to centuries of medieval-style propaganda successfully peddled by extremists and Christian zealots. So I should not have been entirely surprised by the almost hysterical reaction in the mainstream media to news that I am considering becoming a Muslim. Some of the comments were bitchy and snide, other journalists asked me stupid questions showing a distinct lack of research or understanding. One even accused me of suffering from Stockholm syndrome as a result of spending ten days in the hands of the Taliban!

My spiritual journey, like that for many converts/reverts, was meant to be a personal affair between myself and God. Sadly it has now become a very public issue and so I have decided to share with Q-News readers my feelings and thoughts on Islam to prevent any more misunderstandings or misconceptions.

Yes, my journey did begin in the unlikely surrounds of an Afghan prison where I was being held by the Taliban facing charges of entering their country illegally disguised in the all-enveloping burqa. One day, during my captivity I was visited by a religious cleric who asked me what I thought of Islam and if I would like to convert. I was terrified. For five days I had managed to avoid the subject of religion in a country led by Islamic extremists. If I gave the wrong response, I had convinced myself I would be stoned to death. After careful thought I thanked the cleric for his generous offer and said it was difficult for me to make such a life-changing decision while I was in prison. However, I did make a promise that if I was released I would study Islam on my return to London. My reward for such a reply was being sent to a ghastly jail in Kabul where I was locked up with six Christian fanatics who faced charges of trying to convert Muslims to their faith. (After being bombarded with their bible readings, happy-clappy Christian songs and prayers twice a day, I think we can discount the accusations of Stockholm Syndrome).

Several days later I was released unharmed on humanitarian grounds on the orders of Mullah Omar. My captors had treated me with courtesy and respect and so, in turn, I kept my word and set out to study their religion. It was supposed to be an academic study but as I became more engrossed with each page I turned so I became more impressed with what I read. I turned to several eminent Islamic academics, including Dr Zaki Badawi, for advice and instruction.

Thankfully the support and understanding I have been given from my brothers and sisters (for I regard them as that) has been a determined and comforting. Not one of them has put pressure on me to become a Muslim and every convert/revert I've spoken to has told me to take my time. One of the big turning points for me happened earlier this year when the Israelis began shelling The Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, one of the most precious monuments for Christians. Every year thousands of school children recreate the Nativity at Christmas time, a potent symbol of Christianity. Yet, not one Church of England leader publicly denounced the Israelis for their attack. Our Prime Minister Tony Blair, who loves to be pictured coming out of church surrounded by his family, espousing Christian values, was silent. Only the Pope had the guts to condemn this atrocity. I was shocked and saddened and felt there was no backbone in my religious leaders. At least with Islam I need no mediator or conduit to rely upon, I can have a direct line with God anytime I want.

While I feel under no pressure to convert/revert by Muslims, the real pressure to walk away from Islam has come from some friends and journalists who like to think they're unenthusiastic, hard-bitten, hard-drinking, observers of the world.

Others feared I was being brainwashed and that I would soon be back in my burqa, silenced forever like all Muslim women. This, of course, is nonsense. I have never met so many well-educated, opinionated, - outspoken, intelligent, politically aware women in the Muslim groups I have visited throughout the UK. Feminism pales into insignificance when it comes to the sister-hood, which has a strong identity and a loud voice in this country. Yes, it is true that many Muslim women around the world are dominated, but this has only come about through other cultures hijacking and misinterpreting the Qur'an.

Allah ordained equality and fairness for women in education and opportunity. Fair property law and divorce settlements were introduced for Muslim women 1500 years ago; may be this is where Californian divorce lawyers got their inspiration from in recent years! The Qur'an could have been written yesterday for today. It could sit very easily with any Green Party manifesto, it is environmentally friendly and it is a true inspiration for the 21st century, yet not one word has changed since the day it was written unlike other religious tomes.

Yvonne Ridley

The fact of the matter

The accusations by the West regarding the status of women in Islam are due to ignorance. Let us take a look at some facts. The differences between men and women arise due to external events and circumstances as rulings differ even from one man to another or from one woman to another. If it was not the case then someone like Yvonne Ridley would have not accepted Islam, no one put a gun to her head, and she studied the Qur'an and made the decision herself. When she came to Preston the first time to talk about the Palestinian issue someone asked whether she had embraced Islam, and she said: "No, I am still studying the Qur'an," however, few months later when she came back she had submitted to Islam.

The truth of what we are saying is verified by the accountⁱⁱ which Umm Salamah once asked the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) "Why is it that we (women) aren't addressed in the Qur'an the way men are?" In response to her concern, the following words of the Qur'an were revealed:

"Undoubtedly, Muslim men and women, and the believing men and women, and obedient men and women and truthful men and women and enduring men and women and humble men and women, and almsgiving men and women, and fasting men and women, and men and women who guard their chastity and men and women who remember Allah much, for all of them Allah has kept prepared forgiveness and great reward."ⁱⁱⁱ

These words from the Qur'an allow us to see how Allah (The Exalted) has grouped men and women together as accountable for the fulfilment of a common set of duties, which include the entire spectrum of responsibilities that Allah (The Exalted) has laid down for His servants without any distinction between male and female.

Hence, the source of duties which Allah (The Exalted) has assigned to the woman is her status as Allah's servant, while the source of the rights which Allah (The Exalted) has granted her through the Islamic religion and law is her humanity.

Allah (The Exalted) states in the Qur'an:

O people! We created you from one man and one woman and made you nations and tribes that you may recognise one another. Undoubtedly the most respected among you in the sight of Allah is he who is more pious, verily, Allah is knowing, Aware."^{iv}

In conclusion we find that women were treated in atrocious ways and were denied any rights. It is Islam that saved women and raised their status. Islam gave these rights 1400 years ago! If the Qur'an is studied and understood, it all becomes clear as it became clear to many such as Yvonne Ridley. It is requested that readers whenever you hear anything enquire about it as many things are hearsay; once you enquire and understand it by asking those who are learnt in the matter then make a comment or decision. Allah mention's in the Quran:

"O people! Ask the men of knowledge if you know not."^v And also "O believers! If any disobedient comes to you with any news make a strict enquiry lest you may hurt any people improperly then remain repenting on what you have done."^{vi}

I request both Muslims and non-Muslims to read the Quran¹ with explanation and understand it do not make your teachers those who are not practising nor those who do not know.

ⁱ Al-Mar'ah fi-al-Islam wa fi-al-Hadart al-Gharbiyah, page; 71-72, Dar al-Tali'ah, Beirut. It should be noted here that this book was published in 1921, and that following this, France altered its laws such that the woman obtained the right to full ownership and other civil rights for the first time in 1938.

ⁱⁱ Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal in his Musnad and by al-Nisa'i in his Sunan

ⁱⁱⁱ Surah AL-Ahzab: Surah No: 33, Verse: 35

^{iv} Surah Al-Hujurat: Surah No: 49: verse; 13

^v Surah Nahal, Surah No: 16, Verses 43

^{vi} Surah Hujuraat, Surah No: 49, Verse 6

¹ An excellent translation of the Quran known as "*Kanzul Iman*" by Shaykh Ahmad Raza Khan originally in Urdu also available in English translation by Professor Shah Faridul Haque. Tafsir also available in English known as "Noor-ul-Irfan" by Mufti Ahmad Yaar Khan Naimi originally in Urdu also available in English.