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Why Muslim Women Must Re-interpret the Qur'an

Nimat Hafez Barazangi. Azizah. Atlanta: Oct 2010. Vol. 6, Iss. 2; pg. 35, 3 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

The Prophet, as an agent of change, was willing to take a risk by challenging the common sense knowledge of the time. Yet the majority of today's Muslims are not willing to abandon the centuries old representations of Islam that are misleading and unjust, and replace them with the egalitarian intention of Islam as outlined in the only divine source, the Qur'an. Let us remember that the Qur'an was the only written source for almost one hundred years after the death of Prophet Muhammad and before his biographies and these traditions were collected. Essential as they may be, some of these traditions that concern women were abused by male interpreters, such as the issue of attire and seclusion. By using one Hadith to emphasize the extreme seclusion of women behind the head cover, erroneously called 'Hijab,' Muslims are ignoring the basic teaching of the Qur'an about modesty that does not necessarily require a head cover. The head cover was practiced before Islam and continued to be practiced by Muslims for cultural or environmental reasons. More specifically, verse 31 of Chapter 24 concerning the "Khimar," incorrectly translated as "veil," talks about covering women's bosoms and is intended to guard the lineage and protect inheritance.

Also, the intention of interpreting the Qur'an is not only to change the social structure, but mainly to change attitudes and perceptions, the process of which takes a long time. Qur'anic interpretation process is not an "Islamic feminist" movement because feminism is a creative theory intended to regain women's rights in society by mainly analyzing the social construct of gender as the unit of analysis. Islam, on the other hand, is a worldview that propagates a single pair, the human pair ("It is God who created you from a single soul, and made her mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her [in love]" Qur'an, 7:189), with equal rights and responsibilities - spiritually, intellectually, and socially (Qur'an, 96: 15-19), in trusteeship and leadership: "And there will come forth every soul: with each will be an angel to drive and an angel to bear witness" (Qur'an, 50: 21). The unit of analysis for Qur'anic interpretation is Taqwa, i.e., building the capacity of each individual to balance all these roles within the guidelines of the Qur'an, the only divine source of Islam.

Full Text (1263 words)

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The time has come for Muslim women to move from the silent revolution, though firmly grounded in the Qur'an, into an open struggle against injustice. Conditions for the majority of 700 million Muslim women are still pathetic (segregating men and women, secluding women in the name of modesty that sometimes prevent them from accessing educational institutions, discouraging and/or preventing women from congregational prayer and communal decision-making, but above all denying the woman direct identification with the Qur'an as an autonomous person). These conditions require changes in perception, attitudes and changes on the ground. We read in the Qur'an, "God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" 13:11.

In this short essay, I offer suggestions on how women's interpretations of the Qur'an may change the understanding of gender and transform the Muslim communities and majority societies from within the Islamic worldview, while examining the core problem within the globalization of democracy movement, that is, the absence of Muslim women in shaping and developing Islamic thought.

Women's roles have been mostly viewed as secondary, or complementary, in the structure of Muslim societies, and sadly few Muslim women recognize this view as part of the problem. In order to challenge and transform these views, women must re-take their principal role and re-interpret the primary source of Islam, the Qur'an. By doing so, they will implement a fundamental aspect of the social justice contract between Muslims and Islam. Indeed, this

must be the first essential step toward accomplishing comprehensive human rights for themselves, as well as the much-needed challenge to the unwarranted authority held by Muslim men for about 14 centuries.

Neither sociological theories nor political science or legal analyses could fully explain the current crisis in understanding the core problem that Muslim women face, namely their absence in shaping and developing Islamic thought. Muslim women may recite the Qur'an many times daily, but they have been mostly absent from extracting meanings directly from it by themselves and for themselves to produce an egalitarian interpretation of the Qur'an. This egalitarian interpretation must restore the religious authority of interpretation to each individual Muslim by using two basic Qur'anic principles: observing the natural order of the world and developing action plans by means of educated reason and mutual consultation.

In my view Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him, would be amazed at the current Muslims' perception and practice of Islam. Most Muslims believe that by imitating the image and reported actions of the Prophet of Islam that they have mastered their religious duties. Muslims have come to codify these reported actions and erroneously view them as sacred as the Qur'an, to the point of missing the basic message that the Prophet carried for 22 years, between 610 and 632AD.

The Prophet, as an agent of change, was willing to take a risk by challenging the common sense knowledge of the time. Yet the majority of today's Muslims are not willing to abandon the centuries old representations of Islam that are misleading and unjust, and replace them with the egalitarian intention of Islam as outlined in the only divine source, the Qur'an. Let us remember that the Qur'an was the only written source for almost one hundred years after the death of Prophet Muhammad and before his biographies and these traditions were collected. Essential as they may be, some of these traditions that concern women were abused by male interpreters, such as the issue of attire and seclusion. By using one Hadith to emphasize the extreme seclusion of women behind the head cover, erroneously called "Hijab," Muslims are ignoring the basic teaching of the Qur'an about modesty that does not necessarily require a head cover. The head cover was practiced before Islam and continued to be practiced by Muslims for cultural or environmental reasons. More specifically, verse 31 of Chapter 24 concerning the "Khimar," incorrectly translated as "veil," talks about covering women's bosoms and is intended to guard the lineage and protect inheritance.

It is fair, therefore, to claim that the true message of Islam concerning women has rarely been practiced for the past 14 centuries because many of Islam's representations are based on the reported traditions without being corroborated with the Qur'an. Only by producing a new interpretation of the Qur'an, would Muslim women be able to emancipate and help transform their communities and the Muslim majority societies. That is, there will never be a reformation movement in Muslim societies, like what happened in Europe, because the structure of Muslim societies and their aspirations are different: The social structure is built on the extended family social collaboration model (not on the nucleus, economic-based model), while the aspirations are mostly related to past history and traditional authority morality (not to nationalistic or ethnic morality).

How would women's egalitarian interpretation of the Qur'an help? My answer is that it will only be able to help in the long run. First, the current Muslim women's discussion of gender and women's issues cannot be considered a social movement, nor an "Islamic feminist" movement. It is not a social movement because it is still at its infancy, limited to few scholars-activists who are scattered geographically, linguistically or disjointed by ethnic and sectarian disagreements.

Also, the intention of interpreting the Qur'an is not only to change the social structure, but mainly to change attitudes and perceptions, the process of which takes a long time. Qur'anic interpretation process is not an "Islamic feminist" movement because feminism is a creative theory intended to regain women's rights in society by mainly analyzing the social construct of gender as the unit of analysis. Islam, on the other hand, is a worldview that propagates a single pair, the human pair ("It is God who created you from a single soul, and made her mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her [in love]" Qur'an, 7:189), with equal rights and responsibilities - spiritually, intellectually, and socially (Qur'an, 96: 15-19), in trusteeship and leadership: "And there will come forth every soul: with each will be an angel to drive and an angel to bear witness" (Qur'an, 50: 21). The unit of analysis for Qur'anic interpretation is Taqwa, i.e., building the capacity of each individual to balance all these roles within the guidelines of the Qur'an, the only divine source of Islam.

Second, in addition to building individual capacity, we also need to see Islam as a distinct three-legged process of (a) deconstructing the habitual idea of acceptance and transposition of social customs from one location to another, i.e., questioning the taken-for-granted interpretations that are based on certain local customs and practices, (b) making a connection between the message of Islam and the human interpretation of its nature (identifying with the message, i.e., self-reflection and deeper understanding of the meanings of the message of Tawhid, Oneness of God), and (c) reassessing the message of "there is no god but God" on the basis of the needs on the ground while preserving the principles of the message. Contemporary Muslim scholars and organizations are not attending to any of these processes. Hence, the struggle will be difficult, long, and uncertain. However, Muslim women need to

take the lead in rethinking the Qur'anic message in the same prophetic spirit of tolerating peoples' needs in time and place.

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