

- He treated a woman caught in adultery with great compassion. John 8.2-11
- He used the example of a poor woman's dedication to illustrate what true giving was. Mark 12.41-44
- He healed women and girls suffering greatly from various afflictions, acknowledging that it was their faith that had healed them. Matt 8.14-17, Matt 9.18-26, Mark 7.24-30, Luke 7.11-17, Luke 13.10-17
- He received warmly the service of Mary and Martha, despite their different approaches. Luke 10.38-42
- He allowed himself to be anointed by women and commended them highly, even sharing some of his teachings specifically with them. Mark 14.3-9, Luke 7.36-50
- His personality drew many women to him and to his teaching. Mark 15.40-41
- He returned the dead brother of Mary and Martha to life as an act of great compassion, John 11.1-44
- It was to women that he revealed himself after he had risen from the dead. It was they who first spread the news of his resurrection. Mark 16.1-20

Paul the Apostle assembled these perceptions into a single statement proclaiming the equality of the genders, as revolutionary in its time as it was concise.

“ ... For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”

Galatians 3.26-28

Christians will be unable to accept the Muslim claim that Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad were both prophets of Islam in the light of the inconsistency of their attitudes, and those of their followers, towards women. God does not change his mind.

While acknowledging the fact that many Muslim

women are perfectly happy with the status they are accorded within Islam, the Christian's heart must go out to the women who are not so content. Their rights are embedded in the concrete of the social culture of a desert tribe in the Seventh Century. Because of the attitude of Muslims to the Qur'an, which makes it blasphemy even to question its literal interpretation, it is extraordinarily difficult to bring about social change.

One has to admire the courage of the many women who have stood up to be counted against the repressive attitude of fundamentalist Muslims towards women. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, now living in the Netherlands, has had her associates murdered and her own life threatened as result of writing the truth about Islam in her book "Infidel". Similarly Wafa Sultan, who has travelled the world explaining the danger of militant Islam and arguing that Islam is less a religion than a political movement, must be accompanied everywhere by an armed bodyguard as a result of threats made against her life.

Women under Islam clearly have a long road to travel.

Questions for Consideration

1. In a society that generally accepts women as being able to contribute equally to society, how might a religion present itself as offering a relevant lifestyle worthy of being followed in this age?
2. What might be the consequences of the failure of a religion or a society that does not grant equality of opportunity and status to women?
3. Why was Paul's statement in Gal 2.26-28 so revolutionary in its time and also today?
4. Where should Christians begin to look to find a role model to shape their attitude to women? What does this role model tell us?

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Islam and Christianity Series

No. 4 The Status of Women



The attitude of Islam to women is the one which dominates the mind of westerners in their perceptions of Islam. They point to such things as oppressive dress codes for women, enforced polygamous marriages, genital mutilation, the humiliation of "instant" divorce, wife beating, denial of access to a proper education and unequal and diminished rights. There is a perception that a woman is of less value than a man, including her inheritance rights and the value of her testimony in court, both of which are half that of a man.

In the heart of Islam itself, Saudi Arabia, women are denied the vote, banned from driving and are even required to carry written permission from their husbands to be out of the house.

Muslims however claim that these practices, although they are acknowledged as happening, originate from the cultures of the societies that engage in the practices rather than from Islam itself. They claim that women are subject to God, not their husbands, and cannot be made to submit to practices which contravene the teachings of Allah.

Marriage of any kind, it is claimed, is subject to the consent of both bride and groom and polygamous marriage arose out of charitable needs to take care of widows and their children. In any case no husband should take an additional wife unless he can treat them all equally.

In good Islamic practice, before divorce can be contemplated, all possible efforts should be made to solve a couple's problems and a three-month period should be allowed to enable a possible reconciliation.

When Muslims die, strict Islamic laws govern the shares of property and money they may leave to others; daughters usually inherit less than sons. This, it is claimed, is on the argument that men are supposed to provide for the entire household. Any money or property owned by women is theirs to keep, and they are not obliged to share it. Similarly, in marriage, a woman's salary is hers and cannot be appropriated by her husband unless she consents.

Women's dress conventions arise from Mohammad's command that women should dress modestly but this, it is argued, does not stipulate what must be worn. The Islamic customs relating to women's dress tend to relate to how much of a human body is defined in the culture of the society as "nakedness".

However it is best to let the Qur'an itself or the Hadith speak for themselves on this issue. The following quotes are just a sample. Most are from the Hadith "Sahih al-Bukhari" which Muslims recognise as authentic and as binding as the Qur'an.

- *Muhammad to women: "I have not seen any one more deficient in intelligence and religion than you."*
Vol. 2, Book 24, Number 541
- *"Muhammad said, 'I was shown the Hell-fire and that the majority of its dwellers are women.'"*
Vol. 1, Book 1, Number 1; Vol. 1, Book 6, Number 301; Vol. 2, Book 24, Number 541
- *"Muhammad said, 'Bad omen is in the woman, the house and the horse.'"*
Vol. 7, Book 62, Number 30
- *"Muhammad said, 'After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women.'"*
Vol. 7, Book 62, Number 33
- *"And call in to witness two witnesses, men; or if the two be not men, then one man and two women, such witness as you approve of, that if one woman errs the other will remind her."*
Qur'an. 2:282
- *"Muhammad asked some women, 'Isn't the witness of a woman equal to half of that of a man?' The women said, 'yes'. He said, 'This is because of the deficiency of the woman's mind.'"*
Vol. 3, Book 48, Number 826
- *"The woman is like a rib; if you try to straighten her, she will break. So if you want to get benefit from her, do so while she still has some crookedness."*
Vol. 7, Book 62, Number 113
- *"Your wives are as a tilth (a field to be ploughed) unto you, so approach your tilth when or how ye will."*
Qur'an 2:223

- *"The Prophet said, 'If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels send their curses on her till morning.'"*
Vol. 7, Book 62, Number 121.
- *"Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them, forsake them in beds apart, and beat them."*
Qur'an 4:34.

In fairness the Qur'an, in other parts, grants women equal pay for equal work, condemns the practice of female infanticide and recognises that women can enter heaven on the same basis as men.

- ***Those who submit to God and accept the true Faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of God – on these, both men and women, God will bestow forgiveness and a rich recompense***
Qur'an 33.35

Overall, the attitude of Jesus towards the women with whom he was associated was very different. He treated men and women alike as being equal in value, intelligence and understanding. There is nothing in his teaching that indicates that women occupy a lower status than men or should be treated as an object, sexual or otherwise. He also recognised the contribution they made to his ministry on earth.

The Bible is the best source for learning about the attitude of Jesus to women.

- In his childhood, it was Anna the Prophetess who saw in Jesus the saviour of Israel. Luke 2.36-38
- He saw no problem in accepting the suggestion of his mother to resolve an embarrassing situation that had arisen at a wedding at Cana in Galilee. John 2.1-12
- He engaged in a powerful conversation with a woman of Samaria beside a well, revealing extraordinary truths to her. John 4.7-42