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A Monthly Educational Newsletter from Islamic Perspective

A Non-Muslim Investigates Islam

Former OU graduate student Gwen Berry shares her experiences with Athens' female Muslims and describes the myths that were shattered by her experience at the Athens Islamic Center. This speech was given in May of 2004

I came to the Islamic Center for the first time in February of 2004. The reason for my visit was my interest in making a photographic documentary about faith. I don't come from any particular religious background myself, so it is often difficult for me to understand the rifts that sometimes run between people of different faiths. I have always believed in using my camera to show people their similarities, and in this case, my goal was to show the similarities in the way people of different faiths worship God, or Allah¹.

Even with this strong belief that all people are fundamentally similar, coming to the Islamic Center was difficult for me because of the way that the Islamic faith and Muslims, especially Muslim women, are portrayed in our media. Being a very strong feminist, I came with the intention of fighting against this group of domineering men who would treat me as a second-class citizen because of my gender. My stereotypes also led me to believe that the women would be meek and quiet creatures, weighed down by heavy, dark robes of oppressive cloth; probably illiterate, and maybe even abused.

The reality of what I encountered could not have been further from my expectations.

Discovering the large gap between my stereotypes and my observations motivated me to start a photographic documentary on the reality of women in Islam. The goal of the piece would be to give these women a national voice, to let them tell their own stories, and to use these stories to educate other non-Muslim Americans who may have the same stereotypes as I once had.

In order to achieve this goal, I spent a great deal of time with Muslim women from many different cultures, both photographing them and conducting extensive interviews about their lives both in their home countries, and here in the USA. I photographed

Muslim women at work, at school, speaking formally and socializing, in their communities, and in their homes. At the same time, I began to learn what the religious teachings say about the role of women in Islam.

All the women I interviewed strongly believed that Islam is not a religion that promotes the oppression of women.

In fact, many explained that Islam teaches ultimate respect for women, and especially for mothers. Many were also quick to note the differences between their culture and their religion. Though the fundamentals of the religion are the same for everybody; different cultures interpret the teachings differently.

One of the most misunderstood aspects of the Islamic faith is its emphasis on modesty. In recent years, we non-Muslim Americans have come to associate the hijab (head scarf and long flowing dress that women wear to cover their bodies) with oppression. Before talking with these women, I too believed that a heavy, dark, and restrictive cloth was forced upon these women as a way to make them invisible in their societies. I thought that the women had no choice in this matter, and that they were unhappy with their condition. However, when I started talking to them, I realized that I didn't understand it at all.

The idea of modesty, the women told me, is something stressed for both men and women, as a way of keeping interactions between the two more serious and respectful. For most women, covering her body is not something that is forced, it is her choice of when, where, and how much to cover. The extent to which women cover themselves is also something that is very dependent on culture and on time period. Just like we see certain fashions go in and out of style in our own culture, the way in which Muslim women dress also changes over time and between cultures. While women in Saudi Arabia tend to dress in a conservative black hijab and long dress, women in Turkey often wear scarves of bright colors, combined with long sleeved tops and pants. One does not signify oppression anymore than the other; they are just different styles of dress.

(1) God

In mentioning Turkey, it is important to note that a new, “liberal” Turkish government has currently outlawed wearing the hijab in government and educational institutions throughout the country. I have met many Turkish women who are quite happy to be in the United States, where they are free to wear their colorful hijabs. As one woman told me, “If you force [a woman] to wear a hijab, that is oppression. But if you try to take off the hijab that a Muslim woman wants to wear....so that she is more ‘free’....that’s considered the same oppression also”.

The women I interviewed who were wearing hijab stated that dressing modestly was a way for them to be heard and to be paid attention to for their minds instead of for their bodies. They stressed the respect they received when dealing with others and the value they had for themselves. Those who just recently began covering stated that although they expected the change to be very difficult, the resulting positives always outweighed the negatives.

At first, I found these ideas about covering very surprising. They inspired a great deal of thought on how women in different cultures present themselves publicly. Being an American feminist, I believe that women should have the freedom to dress however they choose. That said, there are days I walk down Court Street and wonder if the fashion I see is really promoting a feminist cause. I am certainly not ready to trade in my tank top; but I do see the difficulty in focusing on a woman’s mind when there is writing on her backside.

Another stereotype often held about Muslims is that they are mostly from Arab nations. This is not true at all. There are Muslims living in almost every country in the world. The Arab nations make up less than 20% of the entire Muslim population. Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population. It is also interesting to note that Indonesia’s last elected president was a woman, something that we Americans cannot yet boast.

In an interview with a Kuwaiti Muslim woman, I was told that women who work in her country are given paid maternity leave for up to six months after the birth of a child. These women can also extend that leave for up to two years unpaid. Because motherhood is so highly regarded, their jobs are held until their children are old enough to be cared for by another.

All of the women I interviewed were extremely well educated

and well spoken. Many of them were working outside of the home or they were studying with the intention of working. Some were with young children and not working, some had the intention of returning to work once their children were older. All of the women were quick to stress the value that Islam places on the role of the mother, something we tend to lose sight of in American culture.

In the United States, a woman who is not working is considered less valuable than one who is. In Islam, the role of motherhood is considered equally as valuable a contribution to society as the role of the breadwinner.

None of the women felt prohibited from working, it was a choice for each to make herself.

In the end, I realized that oppression is something very hard to define objectively. Every one of us judges the world through the looking glasses of our own cultural upbringing. It is very easy to point at something we don’t understand and say that it is wrong, just because it is different. But if we could try on another culture’s looking glasses, we would realize that oppression exists everywhere, even here in the United States. Before we point a finger at someone else, we should practice turning that finger around, and take a look at the ills of our own society first. We could start with pornography or plastic surgery; eating disorders or date rape; or just the value that we place on a woman’s youth and beauty versus her wisdom and personality. There are balances everywhere¹.

Gwen Berry

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Hadith² of this Month

The sun eclipsed during the lifetime of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), on that very day when Ibrahim (the Prophet’s son) died, and people started to say that the sun eclipsed at the death of the Prophet’s son.

The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) stood up and led people in special prayer for the eclipse, asking Allah to end it safely.

After he completed the prayer as it was required to complete and the sun brightened, he said: “O people ! verily the sun and the moon are among the signs of Allah and they do not eclipse at the death of any human being. So when you see anything like it (of the nature of eclipse), pray till it is bright.”



(1) You can view Gwen’s Project on www.gwenberry.com

(2) Hadith is anything Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said.



Lamartine

“If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and souls. . . his forbearance in victory, his ambition, which was entirely devoted to one idea and in no manner striving for an empire; his endless prayers, his mystic conversations with God, his death and his triumph after death; all these attest not to an imposture but to a firm conviction which gave him the power to restore a dogma. This dogma was twofold, the unity of God and the immateriality of God; the former telling what God is, the latter telling what God is not; the one overthrowing false gods with the sword, the other starting an idea with words.

“Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images; the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than Muhammad?”

Lamartine, HISTOIRE DE LA TURQUIE, Paris, 1854, Vol. II, pp. 276-277.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Every action which is done with the awareness that it fulfills the will of God is considered an act of worship in Islam. Nevertheless, the specific acts of worship, termed the pillars of Islam, provide the framework of spiritual life.

The ‘Five Pillars’ of Islam are the foundation of Muslim life:

- 1- Testimony of Faith.
- 2- Establishment of the daily prayers.
- 3- Fasting the Month of Ramadan.
- 4- Zakat (Obligatory Charity).
- 5- The pilgrimage to Makkah for those who are able.

This month, we’ll discuss Zakat and its spiritual value.

Zakat (Obligatory Charity)

One of the most important principles of Islam is that all things belong to God, and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. The word zakat means both “purification” and “growth”. Our possessions are purified by setting aside a portion for those in need, and, like the pruning of plants, this cutting back balances and encourages new growth.

Each Muslim calculates his or her own zakat individually. For most purposes this involves the payment each year of two and a half percent of one’s capital.

A pious person may also give as much as he or she pleases as “Sadaqah”, and does so preferably in secret. Although the word Sadaqah can be translated as “voluntary charity” it has a wider meaning. The Prophet said *“even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is charity”*.

The Prophet (peace be upon Him) said:

“Charity is a necessity for every Muslim.” He was asked: “What if a person has nothing?” The Prophet replied: *“He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity”*. The Companions asked: “What if he is not able to work?” The Prophet said: *“He should help poor and needy persons.”* The Companions further asked “What if he cannot do even that?” The Prophet said *“He should urge others to do good”*. The Companions said “What if he lacks that also?” The Prophet said, *“He should check himself from doing evil. That is also charity.”*

Next Month: The Pilgrimage

Islam: A Code of Life

Islam is a complete way of life. This article briefly outlines the Islamic prescription to the various aspects of life which includes: spiritual, intellectual, personal, family, social, economical, political, and international.

Spiritual Life

Islamic prescription: Prayer, fasting, charity giving, pilgrimage, love for God and His Messenger, love for truth and humanity for the sake of God, hope and trust in God at all times, and doing good for the sake of God.

Intellectual Life

Islamic prescription: True knowledge based on clear proofs and indisputable evidence acquired by experience or experiment or by both. The Qur'an points to the rich sources of knowledge in the whole universe. Islam demands faith in God on the basis of knowledge and research and leaves wide open all fields of thought before the intellect to penetrate as far as it can reach.

Personal Life

Islamic prescription: Purity and cleanliness, a healthy diet, proper clothing, proper behavior and good healthy sexual relations within marriage.

Family Life

Islamic prescription: A family is a human social group whose members are bound together by the bond of blood ties and/or marital relationship and nothing else (adoption, mutual alliance, common law, trial marriage. . . etc.) Marriage is a religious duty on all who are capable of meeting its responsibilities. Each member of the family has rights and obligations.

Social Life

Islamic prescription: Man is ordained by God to extend his utmost help and kindness to other family members, relations, servants and neighbors. No superiority on account of class, color, origin or wealth. Humanity represents one family springing from one and the same father and mother. The unity of humanity is not only in its origin but also in its ultimate aims.

Economical Life

Islamic prescription: Earning one's living through decent labor is not only a duty, but a great virtue as well. Earning is man's private possession. The individual is responsible for the prosperity of the state and the state is responsible for the security of the individual. The Islamic economic system is not based on arithmetical calculations alone but also on morals and principles. Man comes into this world empty-handed and departs empty-handed. The real owner of things is God alone. Man is simply a trustee.

Political Life

Islamic prescription: The sovereignty in the Islamic State belongs to God; the people exercise it by trust from Him to enforce His laws. The ruler is only an acting executive chosen by the people to serve them according to God's law. The State is to administer justice and provide security for all citizens. Rulers and administrators must be chosen from the best qualified citizens. If an administration betrays the trust of God and the people, it has to be replaced. Non Muslims can administer their personal life of marriage, divorce, foods and inheritance according to the Islamic law or to their own religious teachings. They may pay Zakat (Islamic tax) or a different tax "Tributes" "Jizyah". They are entitled to full protection and security of the state including freedom of religion.

International Life

Islamic prescription: Man has a common origin, human status and aim. Other people's interests and rights to life, honor and property are respected as long as the rights of Muslims are intact. Transgression is forbidden. War is only justified if the state security is endangered. During war destruction of crops, animals and homes, killing non-fighting person, children, and aged people are forbidden.

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<http://www.ohiou.edu/~muslimst>

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