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Introduction

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Five years ago, I read in the Toronto Star issue of July 3, 1990 an article titled "Islam is not alone in patriarchal doctrines", by Gwynne Dyer. The article described the furious reactions of the participants of a conference on women and power held in Montreal to the comments of the famous Egyptian feminist Dr. Nawal Saadawi.

Her "politically incorrect" statements included: "the most restrictive elements towards women can be found first in Judaism in the Old Testament then in Christianity and then in the Qur'an"; "all religions are patriarchal because they stem from patriarchal societies"; and "veiling of women is not a specifically Islamic practice but an ancient cultural heritage with analogies in sister religions".

The participants could not bear sitting around while their faiths were being equated with Islam. Thus, Dr. Saadawi received a barrage of criticism. "Dr. Saadawi's comments are unacceptable. Her answers reveal a lack of understanding about other people's faiths," declared Bernice Dubois of the World Movement of Mothers. "I must protest" said panellist Alice Shalvi of Israel women's network, "there is no conception of the veil in Judaism."

The article attributed these furious protests to the strong tendency in the West to scapegoat Islam for practices that are just as much a part of the West's own cultural heritage. "Christian and Jewish feminists were not going to sit around being discussed in the same category as those wicked Muslims," wrote Gwynne Dyer.

I was not surprised that the conference participants had held such a negative view of Islam, especially when women's issues were involved. In the West, Islam is believed to be the symbol of the subordination of women par excellence. In order to understand how firm this belief is, it is enough to mention that the Minister of Education in France, the land of Voltaire, has recently ordered the expulsion of all young Muslim women wearing the veil from French schools! [1](#)

A young Muslim student wearing a headscarf is denied her right of education in France, while a Catholic student wearing a cross or a Jewish student wearing a skullcap is not. The scene of French policemen

preventing young Muslim women wearing headscarves from entering their high school is unforgettable. It inspires the memories of another equally disgraceful scene of Governor George Wallace of Alabama in 1962 standing in front of a school gate trying to block the entrance of black students in order to prevent the desegregation of Alabama's schools.

The difference between the two scenes is that the black students had the sympathy of so many people in the U.S. and in the whole world. President Kennedy sent the U.S. National Guard to force the entry of the black students. The Muslim girls, on the other hand, received no help from any one. Their cause seems to have very little sympathy either inside or outside France. The reason is the widespread misunderstanding and fear of anything Islamic in the world today. What intrigued me the most about the Montreal conference was one question: Were the statements made by Saadawi, or any of her critics, factual?

In other words, do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have the same conception of women? Are they different in their conceptions? Do Judaism and Christianity, truly, offer women a better treatment than Islam does? What is the Truth?

It is not easy to search for and find answers to these difficult questions. The first difficulty is that one has to be fair and objective or, at least, do one's utmost to be so. This is what Islam teaches. The Qur'an has instructed Muslims to say the truth even if those who are very close to them do not like it:

"Whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned." (6: 152)

"O you who believe stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor." (4: 135)

The other great difficulty is the overwhelming breadth of the subject. Therefore, during the last few years, I have spent many hours reading the Bible, The Encyclopaedia of Religion, and the Encyclopaedia Judaica searching for answers. I have also read several books discussing the position of women in different religions written by scholars, apologists, and critics. The material presented in the following chapters represents the important findings of this humble research. I don't claim to be absolutely objective.

This is beyond my limited capacity. All I can say is that I have been trying, throughout this research, to approach the Qur'anic ideal of "speaking justly". I would like to emphasize in this introduction that my purpose for this study is not to denigrate Judaism or Christianity. As Muslims, we believe in the divine origins of both. No one can be a Muslim without believing in Moses and Jesus as great prophets of God.

My goal is only to vindicate Islam and pay a tribute, long overdue in the West, to the final truthful Message from God to the human race. I would also like to emphasize that I concerned myself only with Doctrine.

That is, my concern is, mainly, the position of women in the three religions as it appears in their original sources not as practised by their millions of followers in the world today. Therefore, most of the evidence cited comes from the Qur'an, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (S), the Bible, the Talmud, and the sayings of some of the most influential Church Fathers whose views have contributed immeasurably to defining and shaping Christianity. This interest in the sources relates to the fact that understanding a certain religion from the attitudes and the behaviour of some of its nominal followers is misleading. Many people confuse culture with religion, many others do not know what their religious books are saying, and many others do not even care.

¹. [The Globe and Mail](#), Oct. 4, 1994.

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