

The Islamic Opposition to Feminism

Although Islam and feminism are not completely without common ground, the values and principles of Islam and feminism are generally contrary. Both condemn the oppression of women. Both insist that women may own their own property and dispose of it as they wish. In theology, both reject the symbol of 'Father' for God.

However, the feminist view that patriarchy is equivalent to the oppression of women is not compatible with Islam. The feminist idea that traditional gender roles are to be eliminated is opposed by the Islamic idea that the primary role of woman (after that of servant of God) is that of wife and mother.

Theologically, while feminists view the divine as 'Mother and Father' or as goddess, Islam considers the parent metaphor inappropriate for divinity and categorically denies the existence of gods and goddesses.

The Conflicting Ideals Of Islam And Feminism

While feminism rejects any sort of complementarity of the sexes, Islam emphasizes it through the accentuation of different social roles for men and women. Feminism is critical of the institution of marriage because it leads to the subordination of women, while Islam strongly recommends marriage for both men and women, and the marriage institution in Islam is one in which husbands and wives have clearly distinct responsibilities and duties. The leadership role for men is taken for granted in Islam, while feminists consider it oppression.

Traditional Islamic thought has celebrated the hierarchical structure of the universe as a pointer toward the divine, and has seen echoes of this in the relationship of mind and body, spirit and psyche, king and subject, master and slave, and man and woman. This does not mean that Islam condones all such relationships as found in traditional societies, but it does mean that relationships of subordination and hierarchy are not for that very reason to be considered evil, as feminists hold they are.

According to Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, the "crux of patriarchal theology" is "the dominance implied in the relationship between mind and body: will over the unconscious, history over nature, man over woman."¹

Rosemary Reuther displays the same attitude: "Sexual symbolism is foundational to the perception of order and relationship that has been built up in cultures. The psychic organization of consciousness, the dualistic view of the self and the world, the hierarchical concept of society, the relation of humanity and nature, and of God and creation—all these relationships have been modeled on sexual dualism."²

As Hauke points out, "The implicit supposition here is that subordination and inferiority are identical and that they signify 'division' and 'rape'."³

Islam is the obedient subordination of man to God. In his submission to God, however, man is not oppressed by God, but perfected. While feminists consider the condition of women to be better when they have more choices, because they hold that the good is the free expression and satisfaction of free ranging desire, the good in Islam is viewed as the annihilation of the self with its desires in divinity.

This divine encounter is approached through the attainment of virtue and the conquest of the illicit desires of the self.

Complementarity, the Family and Sexuality

Europeans have condemned Islam for its acceptance of human sexuality and sensuality and for its repression of the same. When Victorian morals dominated Europe, Islam was seen as a naughty religion offering its believers promises of sensual delight in the afterlife.

When European morals changed and Freudian ideas had been popularized, Islam was condemned for the limitations it places on sexual relations. In feminist writing, both attitudes are expressed. To a certain extent, this may be due to different ideas about sexuality current among feminists.

Some feminists, for example, consider prostitution a legitimate form of labor, and prefer the term 'sexual worker', while other feminists consider prostitution and the 'sex industry' as manifestations of the degradation of women at the hands of the patriarchic system.

Some feminists call for changes in Islamic societies so that women may be given more sexual license, while others call for greater restrictions to be placed upon men.

Islam clearly recognizes and accepts human sexuality. Sexual pleasure in itself is not considered evil, as it is in some Christian texts. Nevertheless, Islam places strict constraints on sexual behavior. These constraints differ for men and women. Men are permitted to have more than one wife simultaneously, while women are not permitted to have more than one husband at any one time.

It must be admitted that Muslim men sometimes abuse this and other permissions granted them by Islamic law to do injustice to women. Feminists conclude from this that Islamic law is oppressive to women. However, in the context of the laws governing sexual relations in other societies, whether liberal, communist or Christian, some men also take advantage of the opportunities they find there to oppress

women.

Should we then conclude that all laws governing sexual relations are oppressive to women? Even if a society were constructed in which there were absolutely no laws governing sexual relations, some men would still oppress women, probably even more than they do in Muslim societies. The problem would seem to reside not in the law, but in the morals of those who would abuse it for selfish purposes.

With all the freedoms and rights granted to women in the US, the claim that women are better off than they were earlier is dubious. Statistics show that more women live in poverty than before. Divorce has been made easy, and custody of children is normally awarded to mothers, while the support that could be provided by other family members has been undermined with the erosion of the family.

Islamic law functions to preserve the family structure through patriarchal hierarchy in which a base line of duties toward women is clearly drawn. Furthermore, there is considerable room for women to maneuver within the framework of Islamic family law to prevent their husbands from arbitrarily divorcing them or remarrying.

This seems far better for women than the Western customs in which the average duration of marriage is five years and in which it is common for men to keep mistresses.

[The Role Of Women In Islam](#)

The most important and most emphasized role for women mentioned in Islamic sources is that of wife and mother, but the role of woman in Islam is by no means limited to this. Women may be entrepreneurs, as was Khadijah, the first wife of Muhammad (s) and the first convert to Islam.

They may also take a strong political stand even leading to martyrdom, as did Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad (s), wife of Imam 'Ali and mother of Imams Hasan and Husayn, peace be with all of them.

Some positions, however, such as leading prayers for men, are considered inappropriate for women.

Westerners often assume that because social relations between men and women are restricted in Islamic societies in ways that seem strange to them, that Muslim women are not socially and politically active. The following anecdote reported by W. Morgan Shuster regarding events in Tehran in 1911 provides some indication of how mistaken this assumption is.

With the dark days when doubts came to be whispered as to whether the Medjlis would stand firm [against Russian threats], the Persian women, in their zeal for liberty and their ardent love for their country . . . supplied the answer. Out from their walled courtyards and harems marched three hundred of that weak sex, with the flush of undying determination in their cheeks. They were clad in their plain black robes with the white nets of their veils dropped over their faces. Many held pistols under their skirts or in the folds of their sleeves. Straight to the Medjlis they went, and, gathered there, demanded of the

President that he admit them all. What the grave deputies of the Land of the Lion and the Sun may have thought at this strange visitation is not recorded. The President consented to receive a delegation of them. In his reception-hall they confronted him, and lest he and his colleagues should doubt their meaning, these cloistered Persian mothers, wives and daughters exhibited threateningly their revolvers, tore aside their veils, and confessed their decision to kill their own husbands and sons, and leave behind their own dead bodies, if the deputies wavered in their duty to uphold the liberty and dignity of the Persian people and nation.⁴

This is not an isolated incident. Women in Muslim societies are and always have been active in social and political affairs, even if they have rarely taken publicly visible leadership roles. A careful reading of the Qur'an shows that this is no historical accident.

God directly addresses women through the revelation of the Qur'an by assuring them that their deeds will not go unrewarded and by offering as exemplars women who have courageously taken positions in unfavorable social conditions, not however, to secure their own rights or interests, but in obedience to God.

Thus Mary, peace be with her, is rebuked by her people for having the child Jesus out of wedlock. She agreed to have the child when visited by the angel out of obedience to God. In response to the taunts directed against her, Mary offers no excuses but points to the child prophet, who miraculously speaks to them.⁵ The wife of Pharaoh refuses to obey her husband and king in his idolatry because of her acceptance of the message of the prophet Moses.⁶

The primary roles accorded to women in Islam are those of wife and mother, and it is precisely these roles with which feminists are most uncomfortable. Feminists are concerned with 'liberating' women from expectations that they should marry and have children.

They see progress for women in terms of employment opportunities, income, opportunities to experiment with non-traditional sexual relations and political power. Although Islam does not bar women from wealth and power, it places greater emphasis on marriage and the family.

It seems that this accords with the interests of the vast majority of the women of the world. Although they are not averse to wealth and power, their primary concerns tend to center around marriage and the family. Islam dignifies these primary concerns while feminism tends to undermine them.

Of course, the most important role for woman in Islam is no different than that assigned to men—servant of God. It is as servants of God that Muslim women and men take on the roles of mothers and fathers and wives and husbands, buyers and sellers, teachers and pupils, workers and employers, etc.

¹. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, "Werkstatt Ohne Angst" Forum Religion 3!1987, 34. Cited in Hauke (1995), 95.

². Rosemary Reuther, *New Woman—New Earth* (New York: 1975), 3. Cited in Hauke (1995), 96.

³. Hauke (1995), 96.

⁴. W. Morgan Shuster, *The Strangling of Persia* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1987), 197–198.

[5.](#) (19:27–30).

[6.](#) (66:11).

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