

When Women appropriate the Sources

When they asked me to speak at his conference bearing the title: “When Women Appropriate the Sources”, I didn’t know why I immediately thought of Alain Peyrefitte’s famous book *When China Awakes, the World Will Tremble*. But what would follow from the unfinished thought: “And what would happen when women appropriate the sources? Would the whole world tremble, or just the men, or both?” From time immemorial, the world revolves around the absolute power of men and is subject to a sexist order, whether we like it or not and regardless of civilization, culture, and social class. This culture of discrimination that appears to be inherent in the history of humanity was since the very beginning supported, caused and even justified by religious traditions on all sides.

In fact the point of contention between women and religion in general appears too great for anyone to avoid. But if it is now a proven historical fact that religion has so often—if not always—a force of oppression of women, what can be said of the modern world, which has liberated, or at least intends to liberate itself of all religious affiliation? Has oppression of women totally disappeared? Has it really solved the issue of gender equality? Have women finally reclaimed all their rights? Have they really achieved the desired ideal of emancipation?

Forgive my scepticism, but anyone who sees the world in its present state can quickly realize that the fight for more rights and justice for women is ongoing and has a long way to go. Even in societies where “abandoning of religion” is apparent, multiple manifestations of female oppression are still present, crossing all the other forms of domination and exploitation: in the form discriminatory practices in the workplace, increasing physical or moral abuse, economic globalisation in which women are more socially disfavoured, not to mention war and endless conflicts where women are undeniably the preferred victims. “Women are exposed to violence and discrimination in the most countries of the world” summarizes the recent book, published in France last March, with its compelling title *The Black Book of the Female Condition*.

But is it religion as such the oppressor or is it a collective social reality that has decided to appropriate religion and reformulate it according to an ideological representation that allows it to stay in power? When religion is introduced in a social order that is already thoroughly gender hierarchical, it can only be fused with that order.

Equally true is that from the start we seem to be faced with a real contradiction. On the one hand all religious traditions claim to be bearers of a message of peace, justice and

love and revealed by God, who created humankind free and dignified. On the other hand, all religious traditions seem to contribute to a certain male domination in society and they seem to be the main factors of discrimination against women.

This discrimination in the name of religion appears to be universally accepted although some will make the careful distinction of different forms of religious discrimination: Obviously there is the brutal and barbarous elicited by images of Afghanistan and Iran and the soft and muffled as in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In other words, we should be careful not to confound the “barbarous” discrimination inherent in Islam and the more “civilized” one of other religions.

Allow me first to protest against the different “variety” of oppressions towards women. We should not value one type of oppression over another or decry one feature over another. True, different forms of segregation ruthlessly hold sway to various degrees throughout the world, but that does not mean that one type of oppression is worthier than another solely based on the fact that it belongs to another culture.

As a believer and a Muslim woman, I’m convinced that the Divine message is One and the no sacred writ, Muslim, Jewish or Christian approves of such injustice. Was not the message of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad—peace be upon them all—essentially one of liberation? Therefore, to oppress women in the name of a spiritual message is not only betraying the message itself, but to go against what is most sacred in the history of humanity, namely the liberation from all oppression.

It is, therefore, obvious that the different “religious institutions”, the self-proclaimed guardians of the sacred, have profoundly perverted the meaning and purpose of the original spiritual message by building a system that excludes women.

In practically every religious reading one can find a blueprint of male domination applicable to all monotheistic religions. Systems of male political domination, where women are sidelined or even excluded in the name of religion, are instated in areas that the divine message left uncovered.

If in the Judeo-Christian world women’s fight is well-established and a critical debate on religious readings of gender inequality seems to be well underway, free of complications, for some time now, in Islam, the same discourse toils in taking any shape, but it is emerging.

In fact, for a long time in the Muslim world, women have been and are still in certain sections in Muslim societies kept in such a state of ignorance and marginalization that the inferiority that was bestowed on them appeared in their eyes both eternal and natural since it is intricately tied to the nature of a woman and, even worse, decreed as such by God. Even if in Islam the idea of a clergy is not supported, there has been a “scholarly” establishment tacitly set up throughout the history of Islamic civilization that was essentially male. As a result of social and cultural contexts, the establishment appointed itself to legislate in the name of God and explicitly so around two fundamental issues :

women in Islam and political power—two issues that, in my humble opinion, are closely tied.

Allowing in its own way a certain evolution and liberation for women according to context of a given period, the spiritual message of Islam was quickly hijacked by discriminatory patriarchal customs that rapidly gained the upper-hand and re-directed religious discourse towards restricting gained freedoms in the name of religious morality drained of its spirit. The essence of this drive for liberation triggered by revelation has been truly usurped and the impulse that Muslim women's condition has enjoyed has been curtailed, little by little, to the disadvantage of a jurisdiction that ruthlessly sought to cancel all dispensations left by new spiritual orientations. And throughout the centuries, we impassibly witnessed the condition of women in Islam irreversibly deteriorate, and indeed increasingly so with the decline of Muslim civilization. The clash with Western civilizations was even more devastating for women because it came under the pretext of a "civilizing mission" whose colonialist vocation left scars "painfully noticeable" even today.

I believe that with respect to this point, we must not forget that the main reasons that the Muslim world resists a certain part of modernity and outright rejects the emancipation of women—sometimes by women themselves—is due to the deceit of colonization that did everything in its power to set up western modernity on the remnants of the Muslim religion. To protect itself from this intrusion, the Muslim World locked up Muslim women in the bowels of ignorance and are still paying for it to this day. The mission to liberate women—as the West thought fit—has for a long time been perceived as colonialist and had to be resisted. Any wavering from this stance could have been interpreted as betraying one's Muslim identity.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that the improvement of Muslim women's condition for decades now is indeed impressive. Despite the social and cultural diversity of women who are far from being that monolithic bloc of "women, victims of all evil" (ever so appreciated in the West), there is a tangible Muslim female consciousness emerging. Wherever present, this consciousness tries to contest the traditional social order without imitating the Western model.

The issue of women in the Muslim World has always been at the heart of the debate however, what is new is that at the very core of the debate women are trying to regain their voice in order to win back what has always been in the hands of men, i.e. their destiny

Today, a number of women, intellectuals and academics, even women out in the field who live in Muslim lands and in the West, with their academic, scientific and theological research are beginning to question a great number of stereotypes with respect to this issue.

First of all, they denounce the two-faced discourse in which certain representatives of Islam both affirm that Islam treats women with justice, while at the same time they

commend the opposite. There is a very official and incessantly-rehearsed theoretical discourse about women that says that “Islam gave women all their rights, and it honours and protects them...” This endlessly apologetic discourse comes from Muslims—doubtlessly sincere ones—and is built on weak arguments. Its lack of persuasiveness—given the state Muslim societies are in, they would pose a clear contradiction to this claim—reveals a clear and deep state of confusion.

The constant disconnect between this discourse claiming to respect spiritual values and a reality where the worst discrimination is justified, is mind-blowing. From horrific honour crimes, forced marriages, to antiquated tribunals responsible for maintaining women in inferiority for life... And the list of discriminations goes with the stamp of approval by a certain reading of Islam.

Therefore, by re-reading the scriptures and re-evaluating historical data women and men have come to realize that there is no justification for this subordination of women, which is done against the message of Islam. However, we have realized that the majority of the interpretations of Islam are neither manifestations of divine will nor those of wholly defined a social system; rather they are human fabrications that, with time, have become the base of Islamic thought totally under-siege. The fundamental problem lies in a sclerotic exegesis. As it was being compiled centuries ago, it was a display of pathetic literalism especially when it concerned women. Even though the text itself offers extremely important breadth so that each social reality can adapt, generations of scholars slid into the same immutable and outdated readings for a little more than just fear of not being true to their predecessors, considered as “infallible”.

It is in light of this huge gap between the spirit of the text and the different readings that were based on personal convictions, that the believers will focus their efforts on Koranic interpretations. They will first question the supposedly exclusively male domain and question the claim that only men have the authority to interpret what God has revealed in his Book. Why is it that throughout all of Islamic history there was not one exegesis done by a female scholar? And by what Islamic principal does she not have the right to do so?

By venturing in this long heritage, women will be able to cancel out certain theories and prejudices that were assimilated into the Islamic legal tradition, such as: “Women have been created from men and for men”; “Women are inferior to men”; “Men are the protectors and guardians of the women.”

Numerous assumptions considered as Islamic would be completely revisited:

- Beginning with the female experience, which is given importance in the Koranic text, it has been muffled and the different profiles of women presented by the message have been diluted, de-emphasized and even discredited by classical interpretation by holding on to the male experience. Traditional exegesis imposed the male experience as the norm and drew up religiously unfounded stereotypes regarding women.

- The Creation story is exemplary because it is illustrated in the Koran as being neutral, transcending gender and reflecting a message of innate harmony. Traditional exegesis sullies the image of the first woman, Eve, by perpetuating the myth promoted by other monotheistic interpretations such as the myth that the woman is inferior and the eternal temptress. Myths that are totally absent from Islamic tradition.
- The sacred text even celebrates paragons of intelligent women, enlightened rulers, resistance fighters, scholars, saints, prophetesses, and true mediators of the faith. Classical interpretation totally ignores these facts and confines women to secondary roles, even entirely insignificant ones.
- The Koran contains instructions regarding women that were revolutionary for a time where political participation and exile, social participation, the claiming of rights, and freedom of speech were all part of reality. With respect to freedom of expression, forced marriages remain the exclusive trademark of Muslim societies even though religious tradition is clear on this point that a forced marriage is an invalid one. The same is for honour crimes and female circumcision that persist despite Islam categorically disapproving of such ancestral customs.

Therefore, the discourse of emancipating women as it was 1,400 years ago is contrary to today which revolves around sermonizing about abstract concepts and especially condescending ones. The bulk of the present discourse is centered in the woman's place in society, i.e. home, in her obedience to her husband, and in what is the most appropriate way to dress. In short, it is summed up in dress code, the perpetual dangers of her temptress nature and the excessive focus of topics about the female body.

Human deductions that fall short of the principles of equality and justice in the Koran give a re-reading of the Koran from a female perspective all the more importance.

Voices of protest against such unfair interpretations are also breathing life into the new approach to the text and in particular the female experience which should be a standard on equal footing with the male one.

The aim of this re-reading is essentially a liberating one for women of the Muslim world. A reading that reasserts the value of woman's condition. A reading that helps develop real independence and genuine Muslim female identity with all the rights and responsibility that come with it.

Can we therefore consider this a feminist movement akin to that in the West? In all honesty, it is hard to carve out the strategies of either party because their propositions are closely tied to the social and political realities in which they are written up.

The Muslim world hesitates to use this term "feminism" for its colonialist and westernizing connotations.

However, we can say that it has a tendency to be similar to Western feminist movements, in that it is a diverse movement. In that sense, we can say that there are Muslim feminisms, too. But the movement that is of interest to us here is the one that promotes a re-reading of the source texts in order to liberate women from within Islam. This is where this movement perfectly fits with the Western feminist movements in that their battle is one against all types of subordination of women.

The similarities outnumber the differences, even though western feminism has gone through many currents of thought, the core of their demands are centered in gender equality at the social, political and legal levels. The differences will surely be about the causes of subordination, depending on context, and about the strategies that may differ from one level to another.

This is not where the problem lies, because each movement tries to understand why and how other women accept a subordinate role in society. No movement should entertain the pretension that it is better or has the most efficient methodology. This is where I would like to underline two points which I believe are the biggest causes of disagreement.

I'd like to question the claim that feminism is above all a movement that revolted against the patriarchal system represented by all religions and that, as a result, Muslim feminism is an oxymoron because Islam is a religion that oppresses women par excellence. Along the same line of thought we may ask ourselves this question: Does feminism necessarily have to be anti-religious? As we have mentioned above, the feminist movement is diverse, ranging from liberal egalitarian tendencies to Marxist to theology of emancipation and Christian and Jewish women movements denouncing the hierarchy of religious institutions and calling for a re-interpretation of the Scriptures. So why exclude those whose own reference is Islam and who strive in adding their history to universal feminism which will allow it to grow? Was feminism in the West closed to the legitimate battle of Christian women?

Then why the double-standards when it comes to Islam? If justice and equality are at the heart of the feminist movement, then there should be no a prioris because the principle that needs to be respected above all is freedom of choice for all.

The last point to be made is that of the feminist movement's claim that it is universal, yet behaves differently and essentializes the situation of the Muslim woman in order to maintain its perceived ideological supremacy. It is what Christine Delphy rightly called the "interweaving of sexist and racist oppression in certain feminist movements. These movements consider the Muslim woman as the Other, the oppressed, the inferior, the traditional, the veiled."

This Orientalist discourse that categorizes Muslim women behind the grid of eternal submission would, therefore, not be able to integrate in the universal model of the liberated Western women. This "otherness" appears to drive the vision of a universal claim yet uses the language of paternalist domination incapable of breaking with the colonialist civilizing mission: "We do not want to liberate the Muslim woman for the

sake of liberating her, rather to promote Western liberation and to maintain the balance of power in our favour in order to better dominate the other.” The intention here is not to demonize the entire Western feminist discourse, rather the criticism is directed to a school of thought that hampers all attempts to create alliances and foster good will and go beyond two-dimensional adversity that feed ideological extremists. Between the Western discourse that wants to impose its model on the Muslim world who in turn becomes reactionary, we need to find alternatives that transcend the two suicidal strategies.

In my humble opinion this is the true challenge of our societies and feminism, because it is the whole entity that will be tried for its universal claim. The need to go beyond models and methodology that are never absolute should give way to discussing the principles and values that unite us in the vast field of work before us: the quest for meaning, involvement and commitment to equality, the fight against all forms of oppression, domestic violence, and bartering the women body. Numerous are the principles on which we can work together. We need to acknowledge and respect variable strategies of liberation in order to build real alliances and to forge one common universal that would only add to human diversity and build a world of harmony, a goal that becomes harder to reach day by day. This will only be possible if we all let ourselves be guided by our common values and no longer by our fears.

This conference was organized by Muslim Presence Canada and the Université de Montréal.

Asma Lamrabet is a haematologist at the Children’s Hospital in Rabat, Morocco and a Muslim engaged intellectual dealing with the issue of women in Islam. She is the author of two books: “Musulmane tout simplement” (Simply Muslim [and female]) and “Aisha, the wife of the Prophet of Islam”, Tawhid Editions. She is now working on her third book which will come out in June, 2006: *The Koran and Women: a Reading of Liberation*”, also by Tawhid Editions, Lyon, France.

