Male, Female, And Religion Essay, Research Paper

Male, Female, and Religion

It is a perforated, light blue swatch of mesh that represents the obstructed view of the world for a nation of people who were once free. Embedded in this piece of the burqa is the story of the Afghan people–the story of the tears, suffering and suppression of millions of Afghan women, the denial of human and religious rights and the history of a conflict that brewed for years. Although many international organizations and national governments attempted preventive measures to head off this violent international crisis, their efforts proved unsuccessful and, in 1996, the radical Taliban militia seized power. This new control force will prove to be the beginning of the end of the normal lives of women in Afghanistan.

One must consider all the various elements that compromise the picture of Islamic womanhood. Many of these elements are directly related to the religion of Islam itself, such as past and present legal realities, roles permitted and enforced as a result of Muslim images of women, and the variety of Islamic and hetero-Islamic rites and practices in which Islamic women have traditionally participated. The Holy Quran (sometimes transliterated as “Koran”) still forms the basis of prevailing family law in most areas of the Muslim world. It has always been and still is considered to be the last in a series of divine revelations from God given in the seventh century C.E. to humanity through the vehicle of his prophet Muhammad. The Quran is therefore a literal and unmitigated word of God, collected and ordered by the young Muslim community but untainted with the thoughts and interpretations of anybody, including Muhammed himself. It is obvious, then, why the regulations formulated by the Quran in regard to women have been adhered to with strictness and respect. On the other hand, whatever the earlier realities for women in terms of marriage divorce, and inheritance of property, it is clear that the Quran did introduce very significant changes that were advantageous for women. “Contemporary Muslims are fond of pointing out, quite correctly, that Islam brought legal advantages for women quite unknown in corresponding areas of the Western Christian World.”

But what does the Quran specifically say about women? The earliest message of the Quran, and the common themes that run through all the chapters, are of the realities of the oneness of God and the inevitability of the day of judgment. “All persons, man and women, are called upon to testify to those realities.” So in the eyes of God, men and women are fully equal, an idea that we later see is not followed in modern society. Several verses of the Quran present instances where men are a step above women and men are the protectors of women (or are in charge of women) because God has given preference to one over the other and because men provide support for women. “Perhaps because such verses have been so troublesome for non-Muslims (especially feminists), they have been subject to an enormous amount of explanation and interpretation by contemporary Muslim apologists eager to present a defense of their religion.” These writers, men and women, affirm that it is precisely because men are invested with the responsibility of taking care of women, financially and otherwise, that they are given authority over the females of their families. They also seem to lead more liberal lives in society. They are allowed by the Quran to marry multiple wives, so as long as he is able to provide for each equally. A Muslim woman, however, may marry only one husband, and he must be a Muslim. Many are quick to point out that these restrictions are for the benefit of women, ensuring that they will not be left unprotected. “In Islam, marriage is not a sacrament, but a legal contract in which the woman has clearly defined legal rights in negotiating. She can dictate the terms and can receive the dowry herself. This dowry (mahr) she is permitted to keep and maintain as a source of personal pride and comfort.”

It is considered one of the great innovations of the Quran over earlier practices that women are permitted to inherit and own property. Non-Muslims have generally found great difficulty with the Quranic stipulation that a woman is allowed to inherit property but that the inheritance should be only half that of a male. “According to the Islamic understanding, however, the rationale is precisely that which applies to the verse saying that men are in charge of women.” Because women are permitted to keep and maintain their own property without responsibility for taking care of their families financially, it is only reasonable that the male must spend his own earning and inheritance for the maintenance of women, should receive twice as much.

In the early Islamic community, some verses of the Quran were exaggerated and their underlying ideas elaborated and defined in ways that led fairly quickly to a seclusion of women which seems quite at odds with what the Quran intended or the Prophet wanted. In early times, women participated fully with men in all activities of worship and prayer. Soon they became segregated, however, to the point where an often-quoted hadith attributed to Muhammad has him saying that “women pray better at home than in the mosque, and best of all in their own closets.” Because of this, early in the development of the community women began to find the mosque, the common place of worship, less and less accessible. In general, women’s participation in all activities are different than that of male participants, for example, their prayer does not necessarily follow the pattern of the regularized five times a day. Across the Islamic world one can find women spending long periods of time at shrine tombs, relaxing in a space in which none of the demands of their regular lives are put upon them. The shrine is a place in which women can be together, or alone can be in communication with a personage considered in some senses to be able to help them with the kinds of personal problems in which the high God may seem too remote to be interested. The reasoning behind this is that some of the buried fall under a special category of person, a saint. “These saints are reported to be carrying on activities such as praying, reciting the Quran, and responding to the greetings of their visitors.” They are not actually worshipped, but are considered to have a kind of special authority from God to help answer the requests of persons who come to them for assistance.

“As far as education, there are also different ideas of what subjects are deemed “appropriate” for a woman to study, particularly those geared to make her the best and most productive wife, mother, and female participant in the family structure.” The prevalent view, confirmed by the Quran, is that women should be modest and should neither expose themselves to men to any certain extent. This view has obviously contributed to the difficulties of receiving a full education and of securing employment outside the house.

The modern Islamic woman is morally and religiously conservative and affirms the absolute value of the true Islamic system for human relationships. She is intolerant of the kind of Islam in which women are subjugated and relegated to roles insignificant to the full functioning of society, and she wants to take full advantage of educational and professional opportunities. She may agree, however, that certain fields of education are more appropriate for women than others, and that certain professions are more natural to males than to females. “She participates as a contributor to and decision maker for the family, yet recognizes that in any complex relationship final authority must rest with one person.” And she is content to delegate that authority to her husband, father, or other male relative in return for the solidarity of the family structure and the support and protection that it gives her and her children.

“While women in Islamic world have been segregated and secluded, and historically have been considered second-class citizens by the vast majority of males in the community, they have not been totally without power.” They have been able to maintain a degree of control over their own lives and over the men with whom they live through many of the religious practices previously described. The fact that they alone have the ability to bear children, the influence they continue to play in the lives of their sons, and the power they have over their son’s wives are subtle indications that there are certain checks and balances on the obvious authority invested by the Quran in men until now.

A new political force in Afghanistan, the Taliban, have taken all these simple religious and social laws and exaggerated them greatly. When the members of the Taliban first revealed themselves, they gave the world the impression that they had come to rid Afghanistan of its problems. “At first, even the ousted government of today, recognized the Taliban as a legitimate Afghan force that wanted to rid corruption and disorder. However, as time passed, the true nature of the Taliban was revealed.” Soon, the Taliban became known as a militia that used a mixture of false propaganda, foreign money, and opium to get its way.

Although many preventive measures were attempted, all proved unsuccessful, and in 1996, the radical Taliban seized power and imposed gender apartheid. Perhaps because the Afghan conflict was so complex, and because religion and Islamic tradition were at stake, international organizations failed to properly monitor the emerging crisis. While conflict brewed, international organizations showed a lack of persistence and relinquished their duty to uphold standards of human rights when challenged with “religious” or “cultural” values. Today it is evident that justice has not been met–that the Taliban has masked its oppression of the Afghan people under the pretense of religion. Today, the Taliban remains in power and, according to the Feminist Majority Foundation, women are not permitted to be educated or even leave the confines of their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative and covered from head to toe in the burqa, with only a small, mesh-covered opening over the eyes through which to see. “Women are prohibited from going to most hospitals and are severely beaten or stoned to death for violating the Taliban’s harsh edicts.” According to the Quran, women should not expose themselves to public view with lack of modesty. It does not say that they should be covered specifically from head to toe, nor that they should wear face veils or masks or other of the paraphernalia that has adorned many Islamic women through the ages. With the Taliban in power, women are regularly beat and killed for the slightest violations of the exaggerated regulations placed upon women such as attire. “Women and girls in areas controlled by the Taliban are not permitted to go to school or work. The windows of their homes must be covered or painted black. They can leave their homes only in the company of a close male relative, and only if they are completely covered by a burqa, an all-encompassing garment with small mesh openings for the eyes. Women violating this code can be beaten on the spot.” Such incredibly ridiculous restrictions go further into the depths of life: “Male doctors are not allowed to examine the female body. Women and girls are dying in droves from untreated diseases. Widows especially lead gruesome existences, many begging for food just to survive. Rape, forced marriages, forced prostitution and other forms of abuse have become commonplace. Resistance has been met with savage beatings, mutilations, abductions, and brutal murder.” “By publicizing these sorts of acts, though it may be within its rights under Islamic law, the Taliban does its cause of trying to win international recognition no good,” said a spokesman at the regional United Nations office in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital. The militants, the spokesman said, “are only hurting themselves.”

The Taliban’s insistence on secluding women from public life is a political maneuver disguised as “Islamic” law. Before seizing power, Taliban manipulated and used the rights of women as tools to gain control of the country. “To secure financial and political support, Taliban emulated authoritarian methods typical of many Middle Eastern countries.” Taliban’s stand on the seclusion of women is not derived from Islam, but rather, from a cultural bias found in suppressive movements throughout the region.

Some members of the Taliban have been quoted as saying that these actions are temporary and that women’s rights will be restored once the government is more stable. +One must bear in mind that, as history has amply demonstrated, other Muslim countries have committed the same atrocities and the result is that women is that women within their boundaries continue to be oppressed, politically and otherwise. “To maintain control over the people, the Taliban divert attention away from political and economic crises by oppressing half of the population.”

Such a view has no basis in the Quran, yet it has been promoted by the Taliban as “Islamic.” This situation is very distressing considering that women were given rights in the Quran to contribute to the economy by owning and selling property 1400 years ago:

Men shall have a benefit from what they earn, and women shall have a benefit from what they earn. (4:32)

This verse emphasizes the equality of men and women in the economic growth of a society, an ideal that is obviously not even close to the Talibanistic goals.

I had the opportunity to discuss the Taliban and its implications on Islam with a friend of mine who is a practicing Muslim. Although he wishes to remain anonymous, I can tell you that he was indeed born in the United States, has no sisters, and is still strongly devoted to practicing his religion. He said that his family is definitely run in the majority by his father, and that his mother usually fulfills all of his requests. He feels that the media has greatly exploited the events that have occurred since the takeover by the Taliban. He feels that some of the inhibitions on women are taken too far, and that there is no real basis for not considering females equal to males. He is unsure of the future of women in Afghanistan, but hopes that the current plight ends soon. It would be interesting to see how a female Muslim’s perspective on the Taliban situation differs from this male point of view, but I was unable to contact a decent source.

The Afghan conflict shows that international organizations and national governments must work together persistently to prevent crises. Like the threads that together create the mesh cloth of the burqa, the world must also come together

to prevent violent international conflict and create a society in which all human beings will be treated equally, regardless of race, color, gender or creed.