

Religious Practices

Now you have a good background in women's issues and the Quran. I hope that you realize no matter how things are traditionally understood, God is never unfair to women.

I have kept what is probably the most important "bull of inequity" until this point in our discussion. When I was first learning about Islam, I almost did not survive this one. I was told categorically that I could not pray during my menstrual period. Also, I should not fast for Ramadan during my period (a practice we shall discuss in detail later). In fact, I was told I could not even touch the Quran during my period, much less read it!!!!

For most women of childbearing years, these terrible restrictions on performing the critical practices of Islam mean that they cannot really practice their religion for about one quarter of the time. And it is much worse for the older women going through menopause who are spotting much of the time. The ironic thing is that most women are more emotional and need the calming influence of the religious practices even more during their periods and menopause.

Where do these restrictions come from? I was told that the basis was the following verse, as translated by A. Yusuf Ali:

*They ask thee
Concerning women's courses [menstrual period].
Say: They are
A hurt and a pollution:
So keep away from women
In their courses, and do not
Approach them until
They are clean.*

*But when they have
Purified themselves,
Ye may approach them
In any manner, time, or place
Ordained for you by God.
For God loves those
Who turn to Him constantly
And He loves those
Who keep themselves pure and clean.
(The Holy Quran II:222 [2:222])*

I was told that I could not pray, fast, or read the Quran during my period, because this verse prohibited it. What do those practices have to do with this verse? Clearly, this verse is dealing with the intimate relations between a man and his wife.

Yes, a woman's period is an inconvenience, and it is messy and must have been a royal pain in the neck before modern "feminine needs" products. However, God was and is fully aware of all of these factors, and He never said "Do not practice your religion during your periods."

If you say that this verse refers to more than the intimacy between spouses, then you must also say that God does not love any woman who can bear children. This is because He loves only "*those who keep themselves pure and clean,*" and by this definition, no woman who menstruates can keep herself in that state.

The verse that follows makes it even more clear that the issue is the intimate relations between spouses, not a woman's ability to perform her religious practices.

*Your wives are
As a tilth unto you;
So approach your tilth
When or how ye will;
But do some good act
For your souls beforehand;
And fear God,
And know that ye are*

*To meet Him (in the Hereafter),
And give (these) good tidings
To those who believe.
(The Holy Quran II:223 [2:223])*

Reading the two verses together makes it very clear that God is restricting sexual activity during the wife's menstrual period. To generalize from that and restrict her religious practices is to restrict her spiritual growth, for isn't that what the practices are all about?

Rashad Khalifa translated these two verses somewhat differently:

*They ask you about menstruation: say,
"It is harmful; you shall avoid sexual intercourse
with the women during menstruation;
do not approach them
until they are rid of it.
Once they are rid of it,
you may have intercourse with them
in the manner designed by God.
God loves the repenters,
and He loves those who are clean.
Your women are the bearers of your seed.
Thus, you may enjoy this privilege
however you like, so long as you
maintain righteousness.
You shall observe God,
and know that you will meet Him.
Give good news to the believers.
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:222-223)*

To me this translation makes it clear that the verses have to do with sexual intimacy during the wife's menstrual period, not with her ability to perform the religious practices of Islam. Because this is such an important issue, I will deal with each of the practices in its own chapter.

I know that God never intended women to be forbidden from doing the crucial practices of Islam for a major portion of their lives. I believe that this is one of the main roots for the oppression of and prejudice against women that has come to be almost synonymous with Islam in Western understanding.

When women are not allowed to perform the most essential rites of the religion for a large part of their lives, it is no wonder that there are reputed sayings of the Prophet Muhammad indicating that women are deficient in their religion!

Traditional Muslims call these reputed sayings the *Hadith* (usually translated as "Narration"). The *Hadith* is the basis of much of their religious practice. Most Muslims have been taught that the Quran is too difficult to understand, and that the *Hadith* clarifies it. My experience has been very different, however. The Quran is very clear and unambiguous. The *Hadith* I have tried to read have been most confusing, unclear and inconsistent. (Please note that the word '*Hadith*' can refer to either a collection of narrations, or an individual narration.)

Many individual *Hadith* contradict others, which is not surprising given that they were not collected and made available until generations after Prophet Muhammad's death. Until that point they were transmitted orally. The first book of *Hadith* was not available until more than 150 to 250 years after Muhammad died, even the experts are uncertain. The most respected collector of *Hadith*, Al-Bukhari, was not even born until 194 or 198 AH in the Islamic calendar, ca. 810 AD. Thus, Bukhari could not have even begun his collection until 150 to 200 years after Muhammad's death.

When I was a child we used to play a game. We would sit in a circle and one person would whisper something into the ear of the person next to him or her. They in turn would whisper it into the ear of their other neighbor. The whispered message would go all the way around the circle and the last person would say it out loud. Then the originator of the message would tell everyone what the original message had been. Usually this original message was greeted with gales of laughter, as almost

always the final message bore little resemblance to the original one.

This game shows how impossibly difficult it is to transmit information orally without introducing changes. In just a few minutes the message changed dramatically. The *Hadith* went through generations of oral transmission.

In spite of the inherent dangers of oral transmission, advocates of the *Hadith* even go to the extent of saying that the *Hadith* abrogates the Quran. That means that if a given *Hadith* contradicts the Quran, then the Quran is incorrect. They take the *Hadith* over the word of God!!!

This demonstrates how critically important these sayings have come to be in the religion of most Muslims.

There are an appalling number of the *Hadith* that denigrate women. Since traditional Muslims rely so heavily on the *Hadith* as a source of their religion, is it any wonder that women are considered unequal in many Muslim cultures?

As an example, here are a few choice *Hadith* dealing with women:

Women are naturally, morally and religiously defective. (Bukhari - from Iman, 2 as per A. J. Wensinck, *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition*, 1960.)

Ibn Abbas reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: I had a chance to look into the Paradise and I found that majority of the people was poor and I looked into the Fire and there I found the majority constituted by women. (Sahih Muslim - 6597 from *KITAB AL-RIQAQ (THE BOOK OF HEART-MELTING TRADITIONS)* as translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui [www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith]. September, 2001.)

Abu Said a-Khudri reported Allah's Messenger as saying, "the world is sweet and verdant, and Allah having put you in it in your turn watches how you act; so fear the world and fear women, for the trial of the Bani Israel had to do with woman." (Muslim - from *Ideal Woman in Islam*. by Imran Muhammad [wings.buffalo.edu/sa/muslim/isl/hadith1.html]. September, 2001.)

Please note that the first name in the references in parenthesis after each *Hadith* is to the collector of that *Hadith*. So, not

only were the *Hadith* collected generations after the Prophet, they were collected by several people.

I believe that the followers of *Hadith* are very sincere in their beliefs. They take the Quranic verses that tell us to follow the Prophet to mean that we should follow what those who recorded his sayings – *Hadith* – and actions – called *Sunna* – believed him to have said and done. (Though they could not have any first hand knowledge of this, since none of it was written until generations later.)

Indeed the Quran does tell us to follow the Prophet:

*Say: "If ye do love God,
Follow me: God will love you
And forgive you your sins:
For God is Oft-Forgiving,
Most Merciful"
Say: "Obey God
And His Apostle" :
But if they turn back,
God loveth not those
Who reject Faith.
(The Holy Quran III:31-2 [3:31-2])*

There are other verses that also tell us to follow the Prophet. And there are many places that God tells us to follow the Quran. Here is one of the most important places:

*And this is a Book
Which We have revealed
As a blessing: so follow it
And be righteous, that ye
May receive mercy:
Lest ye should say:
"The Book was sent down
To two Peoples before us,
And for our part, we
Remained unacquainted
With all that they learned*

By assiduous study;"
Or lest ye should say:
"If the Book had only
Been sent down to us,
We should have followed
Its guidance better than they."
Now then hath come
Unto you a Clear (Sign)
From your Lord, – and a guide
And a mercy: then who
Could do more wrong
Than one who rejecteth
God's Signs, and turneth
Away therefrom? In good time
Shall We requite those
Who turn away from Our Signs,
With a dreadful penalty,
For their turning away.
(The Holy Quran VI:155-7 [6:155-7])

From these verses, it seems that it is dangerous not to follow the Quran and disregard it. How can you reconcile this with following the Prophet, as God also commands? Especially if what the Prophet said abrogates, or replaces, the Quran?

Don't worry, the following verses tell us that the Prophet could not have given us any other religious teachings beside the Quran:

This is the utterance of an honorable messenger.
Not the utterance of a poet; rarely do you believe.
Nor the utterance of a soothsayer;
rarely do you take heed.
A revelation from the Lord of the universe.
Had he uttered any other teachings.
We would have punished him.
We would have stopped the revelations to him.
None of you could have helped him.
(Quran: The Final Testament 69:40-47)

These verses make it very clear to me that to follow the Prophet, we must follow the Quran. The Quran is the only teaching he brought; following anything else is dangerous. The next verse reinforces this thought:

*Verily, this is My Way,
Leading straight: follow it:
Follow not (other) paths:
They will scatter you about
From His (great) Path:
Thus doth He command you,
That ye may be righteous.
(The Holy Quran VI:153 [6:153])*

Rashad Khalifa's translation of this verse makes this principle clearer:

*This is My path – a straight one.
You shall follow it, and do not follow
any other paths, lest they divert you from His path.
These are His commandments to you,
that you may be saved.
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:153)*

To summarize: Chapter 6 Verses 155 to 157 tell us it is important to follow the Quran. Chapter 69 Verses 40 to 47 tell us that Prophet Muhammad did not bring anything outside of the Quran that we need to follow. And Chapter 6 verse 153 tells us not to follow any other paths besides the path of the Quran.

From all of these verses it is clear to me that we should be following only the Quran, not the *Hadith*. I know that for many this is a shocking concept. They have been raised with the thought that *Hadith* is a critical source for Islam. However, there is absolutely no way of certifying any given *Hadith* as being valid. On the other hand, we know that the Quran is the word of God. Would you rather take a chance following what the Prophet *might* have said, or following what you know God does say? For me, there is no contest. I'll stick to the Quran!!!

There are several verses that support this point. Here is the one that struck me the most forcefully.

*These are God's revelations
that we recite to you truthfully.
In which **Hadith** other than God
and His revelations do they believe?
(Quran: The Final Testament 45:6 – emphasis added)*

Please note that for emphasis, Rashad Khalifa chose not to translate the Arabic word “*Hadith*,” which is usually translated as “narration” or “exposition.” To me this verse says very clearly that we should be following only the Quran, and no other “*Hadith*.”

There is one more critical point that needs to be made here. Muhammad was not the founder of Islam. He was a follower of Abraham as the following verse shows.

*Then we inspired you (Muhammad)
to follow the religion of Abraham,
the monotheist; he never was
an idol worshiper.
(Quran: The Final Testament 16:123)*

This shows that Muhammad followed Abraham’s religion. The following verse shows that the religious practices originally came through Abraham, and Muhammad continued them. Abraham prayed:

*“Our Lord, make us submitters to You,
and from our descendants let there be
a community of submitters to You.
Teach us the rites of our religion, and redeem us.
You are the Redeemer, Most Merciful.
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:128)*

Thus God gave us the practices of our religion through Abraham. And the following verse again shows us that we follow Abraham’s religion.

*And who turns away
From the religion of Abraham
But such as debase their souls
With folly? Him We chose
And rendered pure in this world:
And he will be in the Hereafter
In the ranks of the Righteous.
(The Holy Quran II:130 [2:130])*

Thus, God makes it very clear that Islam is the religion of Abraham. Abraham was important in the founding of all three major monotheistic religions. Judaism and Christianity also claim him. And in both religions we see forms of the original practices given to Abraham. For example, the motions shown in the Jewish prayer book match those of *Salat* (the Muslim Contact Prayer) almost exactly. So do those of a priest giving Mass. Before doing the Contact Prayer, the worshiper performs a symbolic ablution. Ablution is also a common practice among the three religions, and may have been the original basis for the Christian baptism. Charity is another common practice among the three religions, as is fasting in some form, and also the concept of pilgrimage.

To me the fact that Muslims are following the religion of Abraham makes it even more clear that we should be following only the Quran as a source of our religion. We do not have any *Hadith* to follow from Abraham, the founder of our religion.

So what does the Quran tell us as women about our religious practices? Our next chapters discuss each practice and the women's issues related to it.



This story is that of a beautiful Muslim from Sweden. When I first met her I was amazed that she was Muslim, because I had not thought of Sweden as being a country with Muslims. Then I realized that she had an equal right to be amazed at my being Muslim. The beauty and power of Islam is not restricted to those whom we expect to be Mus-

lims. God guides those who are destined to be Muslims, no matter where they are from.

A Journey to Faith

Although I was curious about the Quran since I was a teenager, and had told myself that I would read it someday, the idea that I would one day refer to myself as Muslim didn't once cross my mind. I simply figured that reading it should be part of every person's basic education, as so many people in this world regarded it as their book of law.

My father was a man of travel. His job would take us to different parts of the world. Visiting him during one of his assignments in Asia, I met the man I would marry years later. Little did I know that marrying this man, and eventually divorcing him, would be a crucial part of a long journey of me finding my way to God.

I fell in love with him instantly, and was much too young and inexperienced to be cautious. I had not yet tasted the grueling consequences of seriously bad choices to fear life. So when he asked me to marry him after six years of seeing each other briefly once or twice a year, dreaming, and exchanging young promises, I held my breath for a few seconds, then said yes.

Hopeful I immigrated to start a new life with him. I was told I had to convert to Islam before we could get married. I agreed, knowing very little to nothing about the religion. He practiced the *Shahadah* with me, the phrase I had to repeat to declare my new faith, and he groomed me into answering piously and correctly to questions I might have to answer. I was also told that I had to take on a Muslim name. He chose two for me. I was amused and excited at the same time, but didn't take any of it really seriously. After all, we both knew it was all done so that we could get married.

Gathered in the room for the conversion was my father who had flown in for our engagement, several witnesses, and an

Australian lady convert, who was assigned the job of guiding me through the conversion process. There was also my husband-to-be, watching anxiously from a corner of the room. I was not in any way prepared for the emotional storm I was about to experience that day. As I started uttering the words we'd been practicing together, "*Ashadu An La Elaaha Ella Allah...*" something unexpectedly happened. A powerful feeling completely overwhelmed me, and my eyes were flooded with tears. Afterwards I tried to make sense of what had happened. Was it because converting was such a profound expression of love for my husband? Something told me that this was not the case.

After this experience I found myself occasionally chanting the only 'local' Godly words I knew – the call for prayers. I would sing, cry, and talk to God during private moments. Although I'd always believed in a higher intelligence and a purpose for all that is, I was still surprised at my new activities.

Eventually, preparations for the official marriage ceremony were under way. Everything was arranged, guests were invited, and gifts arrived. One gift was a videotape. I was told "a stranger in the street" had given it to us. It was only a couple of months later however, when my brother in law decided to hand it over, that I finally watched it. On the tape was an eloquent man called Ahmed Deedat talking to people about the Quran. He spoke some about Jesus, which kind of surprised me since I did not know that Jesus was mentioned in the Quran. Wasn't the Quran all about Muhammad? He also mentioned a new mathematical finding in the Quran, based on the number 19. I started asking people around me for more information about this, but to my great surprise, nobody could tell me anything.

I was sent to take lessons on how to pray and read Arabic. The Australian lady, my tutor, helped me buy my first Quran, in English. I never got down to reading it, however, as I was told that I couldn't open it if I hadn't washed in a certain way, uttering certain Arabic words. As I opened it and turned the pages, it had to be with my right hand, saying some more Arabic words. Finally I was told that I could not open it during some

other specific circumstances, during menstruation being one of them. Reading the Quran was hard (I thought then). Covered from head to toe I tried to follow her instructions on how to position myself for the prayer. It felt like a very solemn moment, and I was enjoying the effort. But sitting in that peculiar position, with my toes bent in a certain way touching the floor, was much too painful, physically, to go through with it. Praying was really hard (I thought then).

Soon my tutor and I were becoming friends, and much more informal with each other. When realizing how non-religious the family I lived with really was, she said that she could not see me staying with them for very long. I was surprised at her candor, and didn't quite know what to make of her statement, as I didn't see myself as a religious person. She seemed to see something else however, long before I would.

The marriage did not last long. Mercifully, God allowed me to return to my homeland with my newborn son. The first apartment we rented upon our return, turned out to be sitting right on top of a small mosque. After settling in I decided to knock on their door to ask for information about number 19 in the Quran. They all looked puzzled, and I was starting to think that I would never find more information about it. Two years later however, as I was starting to forget all about the Quran and its code, my mother called to invite me to meet a new neighbor claiming to be Muslim. She made a point of telling me that she didn't cover her hair. After being briefly introduced I was quite taken aback when one of the first questions she asked me was: "Have you heard about the number 19?"

She gave me a translation of the Quran containing information about the code 19 the same day. That day my life changed. That day I realized that the Quran was the word of God, and I decided to become a Muslim, in my heart. Years after that brief first encounter when uttering those words to convert, I was again feeling my soul. Giving in to its needs, it was now crying of joy, shivering with life, and in need of care.

During the months that followed I remember not wanting to sleep, spending most nights reading this wonderful scripture—

the Quran. It was truly an awakening and healing experience. I found answers to questions I'd always had, and answers to questions I didn't even know I had, and I was feeling whole for the first time in my life. Although it was all new and somewhat strange, it was the most natural thing in the world for me. Everything looked different in my eyes, still everything was the same.

Almost twelve years have passed since the day I decided to submit to God, the Lord of the Universe, and it still feels like my journey has just begun. It has turned out to be quite a lonely path, filled with lovely company. Lonely in the sense that, as we are born into this world and as we leave, is how we travel in our spiritual journeys, as individuals.

– *Swedish Muslim*