

Introduction

One of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me was getting a Quran from a friend who didn't want her dog to chew on it again....

Of course, I was certain that I could never become Muslim. I mean, clearly it was insane for an enlightened Western woman to even consider such a self-destructive act.

Little did I know, on that fateful day in the mid 1970's, that the Quran's view of women is very different from what we know as the "Islamic view." In fact, of all of the scriptures, the Quran is definitely the torchbearer for women.

Not what you would expect is it? But neither is Quranic Islam what you would expect. Most of what we know as Islamic is culturally Islamic, rather than scripturally Islamic. It is based on Arab traditions and culture, not on the Quran. Like other religious traditions, the Arabs inter-mixed their culture with divine revelation, and taught that as Islam.

How could they do otherwise? Our understanding of everything is heavily influenced by our culture, even when we believe we are being unbiased. So the manner in which we translate divine commandments into our daily lives is based on our culture.

This is as true for the Western world as it is for any other part of the world. All human beings see the world through the distorting lenses of their own culture.

However it is my belief that we are coming into a new era of understanding. Global communications allow us to view our "neighborhood" on a much-enlarged scale. We can exchange e-mail with new friends all over the world and join chat rooms with people as geographically distant as China, Norway and Australia. Now we really begin to glimpse the truth of the phrase "the global village."

Actually, this process has been underway for a long time, starting with written language, accelerating with the invention of printing, and much later with movies, radio and television. Now this process is sped even faster by the Internet.

With new understanding comes a new means of seeing our own culture with a bit more objectivity. It seems to me that this is happening all over the world, and nowhere more dramatically than in the Muslim world. Within the span of one generation, enormous changes have begun to take place for most Muslim women.

Of course, in some places, there have been backlashes and increasing suppression of women in an attempt to maintain the old order. Afghanistan under the Taliban is a prime example. Still, the general trend is positive.

Perhaps a major factor in this progress is what seems to be a growing movement to look again at the Quran as Islam's source, rather than the recorded oral traditions of *Hadith* and *Sunna*. (*Hadith* is what has been understood to be the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and *Sunna* is what has been understood to be the practices. Neither was written down until generations after Muhammad's death.)

I will not pretend to be an unbiased source, to me there is no question that the Quran is the revealed word of God, first put into writing 1400 years ago. Even those readers who do not hold my view will find some thought-provoking concepts in the Quran. For Muslim and non-Muslim alike, the Quranic view of women is well worth investigating. This is the purpose of what I lay before you now. I hope you enjoy!