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# Answering Islam

a christian-muslim dialog

## Women in the Light Of the Qur'an

By Jacob Thomas

It is rather puzzling that some liberal Muslim writers, who are active in defending women's rights, claim that the discriminatory traditions regarding women's inferiority to men are not derived from the Qur'an!

A famous Muslim women's rights defender, Shirin Ebadi, has done just that. This Iranian intellectual was the first woman judge in pre-revolutionary Iran. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 and is highly regarded by all freedom-loving people. She wrote an article for The Wall Street Journal on March 14, 2012 and it bore the title **"A Warning for Women of the Arab Spring"** and was followed by an instructive sub-title: **"I hope that in the countries where people have risen against dictatorships, they will reflect on and learn from what happened to us in Iran."**

Ms. Ebadi does not like the term, **"Arab Spring,"** as she is not impressed by the mere fall of dictators, particularly referring to Mubarak in Egypt, which is a first step in any revolution. In today's world, the success of any revolution, even an Arab one, such as seen recently in Egypt, should include a concern for and improvement of women's rights.

The **Muslim Brotherhood** and **Salafist** organizations, now that they have gained majority seats in the Egyptian parliament, are intent on giving prominence to Shariah laws. If such were to go into effect, Ms. Ebadi adds, it "could result in a regression of rights for women and girls similar to what we experienced in Iran in 1979."

In referring to her own country, Ms. Ebadi stated that *"These discriminatory and misogynistic laws are not Islamic and cannot be found in the Qur'an... Many Iranian religious authorities are against these laws. Yet the fundamentalists in power, because they belong to a patriarchal culture, insist on enforcing them. Iranian women are doubly oppressed, both by discriminatory laws and by unjust traditions."*

This is a surprising statement coming from one who ought to know that several texts of the Holy Book of Islam expressly state otherwise. It is a well-known fact that in Sunni Islam, all the recognized schools for the interpretation of the **Shariah** Law (which is based on the Qur'an) agree on the literal meaning of these texts, namely that women are not on par with men in their status and their rights. I realize that Shirin Ebadi lived in Iran where Shiite Islam is the state religion, and where **Ijtihad**, i.e. the interpretation of the sacred text is practiced by recognized religious

authorities, unlike in Sunni Islam where *Ijtihad* was “closed” around 1000 years ago. She does assert that some of the religious authorities in Iran “are against these laws” which is indicative that she perhaps has hope that the Qur’an is or will be open to revision concerning its regressive view of women. When it comes to the status of women at this point in time there are no differences of interpretation between these two major divisions in Islam. It is possible that some Iranian religious authorities that Ms. Ebadi mentions might offer opinions that would mitigate the harsh treatment of women that is based on the Qur’an. However, at this point such opinions are merely personal and don’t get much traction against the long-standing tradition regarding women rights.

My being an Eastern Christian may cause some to question my impartiality on this subject. Therefore, I will let an essay by *Sa’eed Nasheed*, a Moroccan Muslim intellectual speak to the issue. In September 2010 he posted an article entitled “*What is the Qur’an?*” on the Arabic-language website, [www.alawan.org](http://www.alawan.org). Among several issues that Mr. Nasheed dealt with, his critique of the teachings of the Sacred Text on the status of women is definitely not in agreement with Ms. Ebadi’s claims about the Qur’an’s teachings in the Wall Street Journal article. It is not only some Muslim interpreters of the Qur’an who should be held responsible for the deplorable plight of women in Islam!

Here, translated from Arabic, are excerpts from Sa’eed Nasheed’s thought-provoking reflections. The translation of the Qur’anic verses is from Marmaduke Pickthall’s “*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an.*”

As a Muslim, while in the process of reciting the Qur’an, I came upon my first difficulty in *Surah 58, Ayah 3, “Al-Mujadilah: She That Disputeth, [or] The Pleading Woman,”* which states: “*Those who put away their wives (by saying they are as their mothers) and afterward would go back on that which they have said, (the penalty) in that case (is) the freeing of a slave before they touch one another. Unto this ye are exhorted; and Allah is informed of what ye do.*”

I thought to myself, I would never do such a thing to my wife; therefore, this *Ayah* is irrelevant and has nothing at all to teach me.

I kept on reciting and stopped at *Surah 4, Ayah 24, “Al-Nisa’ (Women)* that reads: “*And all married women (are forbidden unto you) save those (captives) whom your right hands possess. It is a decree of Allah for you. Lawful unto you are all beyond those mentioned, so that ye seek them with your wealth in honest wedlock, not debauchery. And those of whom ye seek content (by marrying them), give unto them their portions as a duty. And there is no sin for you in what ye do by mutual agreement after the duty (hath been done). Lo! Allah is ever Knower, Wise.*”

To tell the truth, my right hand has never owned anyone, either at home or at work. Furthermore, I am not inclined to possess more than one wife. So this *Ayah* has nothing to teach me personally; in days gone by, it stated the obligations of those men whose whims and desires made them covet more than one wife.

Continuing my recitation of the Qur’an, I came across these words of Allah from the same *Surah, Ayah 34*: “*Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are*

*the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great.”*

Now let's suppose I came home and began to beat my wife for one reason or another; this would be a criminal act; it would certainly upset my children and the neighbors. This **Ayah** does not relate to me at all; it's utterly irrelevant!

I have always maintained that I am a Muslim. However, I must reach a bold and honest decision regarding my relation to Islam's sacred text, which is loaded with burdensome injunctions that don't concern me at all. My apprehension is shared by millions of Muslims who hesitate to express themselves openly about these topics.

In the final analysis, Islam will not be saved until we study its development throughout history, and disconnect it from its sacred texts. Islam belongs to the Umma; it will survive by the Umma's ability to transcend the Qur'anic text by viewing it as a document that played a major role in the birth of Islam, but which is not a normative document for our times.

We conceive of Allah as the source of life, the maker of the world, and the master of history; we understand the Qur'an as created speech, just as the *Mu'tazilites* taught during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Now being created speech should not imply that its teachings are valid for all times and places. On the contrary, every creature possesses a limited life span; this applies to the Qur'an.

Rather than regarding the Qur'an as an unchanging constitution upon which the Umma must base its laws, as many claim, actually it is no more than a historical document. Allah gave it to Muhammad as a tool in his struggle for the spiritual leadership of a people known for their love and admiration of Arabic rhetoric.

The Qur'an should be considered as a constituent text in the sense that its role or function had ended with the birth of a new historical order, namely, the Islamic Umma. Therefore, we find several Qur'anic Ayahs that are directed exclusively to the receptor (Muhammad) at a specific moment during the emergence of the Umma. Several of the Qur'anic injunctions had to do with the Prophet; now after his passing, they can no longer be normative for Muslims.

To read the original Arabic text of the essay of Sa'eed *Nasheed*, please use [this link](#).

I have quoted at length from Mr. Nasheed's essay to show how a liberal Muslim intellectual and believer looks upon the Qur'anic teachings that consigned women to a lower level in society. Rather than blaming the exegesis of certain Muslim scholars for this state, he pointed to the undeniable meaning of the *ayahs* (as clearly understood in the Arabic original text) that women are inferior to men! He sees the Qur'an as a "historical document", portions of which referred strictly to Muhammad and others which were relevant only to the age in which they appeared. He would like them to be considered "no longer normative". He is making the case that things in Islam need to be reformed, to say the least.

Certainly, it is not my purpose or goal to be unduly critical of Shirin Ebadi; her credentials as a scholar and human rights activist who struggled valiantly for freedom within the Islamic Republic of Iran, have rightly earned her worldwide admiration and acclaim. Rather, I believe attention must be drawn to the fact that much as she might like it to be different, the Qur'an does relegate women to a lower status in the human family. The wide readership of The Wall Street Journal needs to be aware of this fact. It would have been more helpful to the cause of women's rights in Islam if Ms. Ebadi had called for a new hermeneutic of the Qur'an, that would allow certain passages to be no longer normative. Giving Muslim women equal status would go far in solving the serious problems that confront the Islamic nations, as they seek to cope with the challenges of modernity and globalization.

#### **Notes:**

**The following paragraph that relates Sa'eed Nasheed's intellectual pilgrimage, is based on his autobiographical article posted on 14 January, 2010**

About 25 years ago, Sa'eed was studying philosophy at the University of Rabat, Morocco. He was an activist among leftist-leaning university students. Quite often, he would miss attending classes, spending his time at the Soviet Cultural Center, learning Russian, and reading Pravda and other Soviet publications. He became very fond of his professor of philosophy, Abdel-Salam ben-'Abdel-'Ali who taught his students how to reflect and think through the problems that faced the nation at the end of the century. Sa'eed's world almost collapsed with the fall of the USSR, but eventually, he could see the weakness of all totalitarian ideologies and regimes. However, his love-affair with Russian writings and his acquaintance with post-modern philosophers contributed to his loss of faith in the truth claims of Islam. Somehow, he still considers himself a Muslim, but a Muslim who questions everything, even the authority of the Qur'an, Muhammad's claims, and Allah's!

#### **Regarding the *Mu'tazilites* in early Islamic history**

The *Mu'tazilites* advocated the theory of the “**Createdness of the Qur'an**” which received the blessing and support of several Abbasid caliphs during the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Eventually, the opposite doctrine of the “**Uncreatedness**” of the Qur'an, prevailed in Sunni Islam, through the influence of *Imam Hanbal*.

The *Mu'tazilites'* outstanding service to Islamic thought was the assimilation of a large number of Greek ideas and methods of arguments ... The Greek ideas thus introduced by the *Mu'tazilites* came to dominate one great wing of Islamic theology, namely, rational or philosophical theology. Since the *Mu'tazilites* were regarded as heretics by the Sunnites, their ideas and doctrines could not simply be taken over, but exercised an influence indirectly. (W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh University Press, 1973, pp. 249, 250)

To read the informative Profile of Shirin Ebadi prepared by BBC NEWS, please follow [this link](#).

**Articles by Jacob Thomas**  
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<http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/thomas/ebadi.html> (Accessed 10/4/16)