

PART 3: REACHING MUSLIM WOMEN AND 'DISCIPLINING' ONESELF**A SUNNI WOMAN'S HEART****Part 3 – An Obsession with Correct Behaviour****by Tahira**

Tahira is a North American who has lived in a variety of neighbourhoods in the Middle East for nearly 20 years and engaged in a variety of ministries. She holds a D. Min. with a focus in Missions and Cross – Cultural Studies from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Sunni Arab women are preoccupied with doing the right thing. This is the most dramatic difference I have observed between them and Western Christian or secular women. This preoccupation is reflected in the questions they ask one another: "Am I allowed to wear shoes with open toes?" "Should I pray when I travel if I am unsure of the direction of Mecca?" "What should I do with an old newspaper that has the word "Allah" in it?" "What if I am entertaining a guest at prayer time?" "What is the correct order for washing body parts before prayer?" The questions are endless.

Barriers

Many Sunni women are fearful of not doing the right thing. They are taught that the only hope they have for pleasing God is by correct behaviour, and that if they do not please God, torture awaits them. To deny this belief seems an invitation to social and moral chaos. Although the official theology of Islam denies it, the *de facto* theology of many Sunni women is that people determine God's attitudes toward them, and his choices about them, based on their conformity to Islamic standards. In a religion which emphasizes submission, there is considerable appeal in subtly being able to control God through submission to him.

There are advantages to a worldview in which every behaviour is prescribed.

The repetition of Islamic ritual and the detailed code of *shari'ah* relieve people who lack self-confidence from the burden of making hard moral choices. Ritual and *shari'ah* also provide a sense of rootedness in the widely accepted and authoritative traditions of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the consensus of the community (*ijmaa'*). Religion is, by definition, a code of behaviour for these women. That leaves little room for a gospel of grace, especially when that gospel is proclaimed by people whose failure to live up to Islamic standards marks them as irreligious or

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heterodox.

Conformity is rewarded with social reinforcement by the community. The honour – shame culture means that, for many, social expectations replace conscience and spiritual sensitivity. Failure to keep certain standards may result in serious censure by the Muslim community. This is particularly true for women, who tend to respond to a sense of shame by increased submissiveness.¹ Because of the emphasis in traditional Sunni Islam on submission to the received tradition, thinking for oneself about ethical issues is portrayed as dangerous and rebellious, and the women are not socialized to do so. The women do not want to risk losing the merits which they imagine they have accumulated by doing what Islam required of them. The evangelist among this subculture may find women socially, intellectually, and morally incapable of considering any alternative to what they have always been taught is God's will.

The principle-based, Spirit-guided ethics of the New Testament are seen by the women I studied as vague and idealistic at best, and antinomian or heretical at worst. Islamic rejection of the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement leaves no viable religious alternative except attempting to achieve one's own righteousness. The women are constantly told in a variety of ways that Islamic law is superior to any other, and the ongoing litany of disparaging comparisons, whether fair or otherwise, ensures that women who encounter Christian ethical principles view them initially through jaundiced eyes. The doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is absent in this variety of Islam, and without it what alternative guidance is there other than detailed law? Furthermore, Muslims expect religious law to encompass civil law, and find the church wanting in presenting a truly Christian practical civil law code. If biblical ethics are not suitable for running a society, of what real good are they? The church has an uphill battle in making the gospel of grace understood in this context.

Bridges

One of the aspects of Islamic devotion which Christians find easiest to admire is the sincere desire of many Muslims to please God in every aspect of life. This we can affirm and identify with. Likewise, we can verify that human beings are dependent upon revelation to know what God wants, and that He makes His will known. There is a strong strand of biblical teaching which affirms the Islamic notion that God appreciates those who seek to please him, and that he rewards them

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1 Shiraev and Levy, *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Critical Thinking and Contemporary Applications* (Boston: Pearson), 176, citing Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, and A. Blok, "Rams and Billy-goats," 427-440.

with guidance in this life and with benefits in the hereafter. Both communities believe in theory and practice that God hates evil, ingratitude, pride and rebellion. There is some overlap in what each community considers acceptable or unacceptable to God. These shared beliefs and attitudes might reassure Muslims obsessed with keeping rules that Christians also desire to please God and have a theological basis for seeking to do so. Some Muslims assume that Christians are satisfied with the moral standards of Western, "Christian" countries, and may be relieved to find that their Christian neighbour is equally appalled at the decadence.

Both communities recognize that human beings frequently fail to meet God's standards, and that some form of atonement is needed, although the two understandings of atonement differ markedly. Our common human plight and its solution are topics for which Islam's answers are less than impressive.

Fault Lines

Many Muslims know in their hearts that Islamic law is not always the solution, although they are reluctant to admit it. Islam may seem to have a rule for everything, but Muslims are regularly faced with situations for which they do not yet know the rule. This can be frustrating and confusing. A situation may call for an immediate decision which allows insufficient time to consult an appropriate authority, and the decision-maker is left in a moral dilemma. Furthermore, Islamic schools (traditional) and muftis (contemporary) vary considerably in their rulings, and a Muslim faced with apparently contradictory rulings finds herself in a quandary. Certain laws of unquestioned historical validity seem inadequate, cruel or just plain wrong to most Muslims today, such as needing four eyewitnesses for a rape conviction, or lashing a

married adulteress to death. Critical studies, ridiculous fatwas of some muftis, and the backward and rigid image of Islamic scholars are all eroding the traditional authority of the consensus of Muslim scholarship. Some Muslims may feel disillusioned by the hypocrisy of those who stick to the letter of the law, but whose character is unbecoming. If a Muslim realizes that the *shari'ah* is not the perfect solution, she may start looking for an alternate authority, either within Islam or beyond.

A conscientious Muslim could easily feel overwhelmed and condemned by the thousands of stipulations of Islamic law, both mandatory and recommended. A major misdeed could leave her feeling that she has more sin than she can atone for. It may be that the distance between Islamic standards and one's own behaviour could become so great that the person begins to recognize the need for a Saviour. One woman I know began the search that led her to Christ when she

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saw an atheistic communist behave with greater integrity than her own.

The story of Adam in the Islamic tradition suggests that human sin stems from ignorance or weakness. It seems ironic that women who have witnessed their country torn apart by extremes of wilful human sinfulness would still cling to such a view. Even at a personal level, anyone who is honest with herself will recognize that she has a deeper problem than forgetfulness, and such honesty should lead to a healthy sense of shame.

Worthy of Observation

What signs might we look for when deciding where to focus our attention? It is worth taking note of those who find the guidance of Islam wanting. Muslims who are seeking to know the will of God may be open to consider what the Bible and the Holy Spirit have to say to them. Those who turn to folk Islam or occult practices for guidance in decision-making tacitly declare that they have found conventional Islam inadequate to their needs. There may be some openness on the part of devout people who keep all the rules without being satisfied spiritually and emotionally. When people feel that religion is being used for behavioural manipulation, they may resent it and look for alternatives.

There are also people who find *themselves* wanting. Muslims who feel that they can never meet God's standards may be looking for another basis of righteousness, an intercessor,² or some reassurance of God's forgiveness.

Missional Strategies

'Contextualized' approaches have the advantage of removing unnecessary stumbling blocks by adapting Muslim standards. Care should be taken, however, not to reinforce the notion that pious behaviour makes one acceptable to God.³ Regardless of the degree to which workers choose to conform to Islamic standards, at the very least, they should be aware of and sensitive to how Muslims evaluate their behaviours and attitudes. While we cherish the freedom we have in Christ, there is a place for "living as one under the law in order to win those under the law."⁴

There is a desperate need for the church in the Muslim world to articulate a positive, biblical theology of God's law. We need credible answers for Muslims who question the adequacy of Christ's standards as a rule for society. We also need to explain convincingly and with confidence the relationship between grace and holiness. Believers from any background should be taught how to explain to Muslims why living by biblical standards pleases God, and how grace

2 Admittedly, the first place the Muslim goes for intercession is to Muhammad, not Jesus.

3 Care should also be taken to ensure that believers from a Christian background are not maligned because they enjoy legitimate freedom in Christ.

4 1 Corinthians 9:20.

promotes, rather than discourages, true holiness. Evangelists would do well to bear in mind that most Sunni Muslims have no concept of living by the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit. They need both an explanation of God's work in nurturing the individual⁵ and a demonstration in real life of the Spirit's ability to produce profound holiness in individuals and societies.

New believers who join the church from a Sunni background may try to replace a new, "Christian" set of rules for Muslim ones, or may completely reject the conformist orientation of their background. It is imperative that churches distinguish between biblical teachings and some Christian rules and customs which are not necessarily biblical. All believers need mentoring or discipling in daily holiness in order to develop wisdom, confidence in God's grace, a love for true righteousness, and an ability to relate in a godly way to those inside and outside the fellowship of believers in Jesus. This discipleship would include appropriate spiritual exercises with accountability.

For Muslims, both seekers and new believers, there is value in learning the ethical teachings of the New Testament, especially as expressed in the parables and pithy sayings of Jesus. Some believers of this background may find it helpful to practice ritual, symbolic expressions of their faith in Jesus, whether by adapting the rituals with which they have grown up, adopting those of the Christian community, or by developing their own.

Conclusion

By far the most important preparation for sharing the gospel with Sunni women is to be sure that one's own attitude is right.

By far the most important preparation for sharing the gospel with Sunni women is to be sure that one's own attitude is right. If we frequently judge and compare people's actions, we reinforce the notion that what really matters is correct behaviour, and so nullify the gospel of grace. When we fail to heed the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit, we also fail to give Muslim acquaintances an example of true godliness based on a relationship rather than rules.

If we consider the ethical teachings of Jesus impractical for our daily choices, we cannot expect our Muslim friends to want Jesus as their leader. However, if Muslims see in us Jesus' righteousness, "a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees,"⁶ the Spirit may nurture in some an attraction to the source of that righteousness.

*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
And give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Matthew 5:16

5 This is not an easy task. "The Holy Spirit" is understood by Muslims as the angel Gabriel, and the doctrine of the Trinity is notoriously treacherous water across which to transport Muslims to faith in Jesus. An acquaintance with Sufi thought might be a source of helpful vocabulary in this regard.

6 Matthew 5:20.