

Book Review

Lifting the Veil: The World of Muslim Women

Reviewed by Donna Smith.

LIFTING THE VEIL: The World of Muslim Women, by Phil and Julie Parshall, Waynesboro, Georgia, USA: Gabriel Publishing 2002, 283 pages.

Phil and Julie Parshall have provided us with an excellent overview of the world of Muslim women. Their examples come from a wide geographic range, including parts of the Arab world, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The sixteen chapters mention religious beliefs (fundamentalism and folk religion), social customs, sexual practices and conversion incidents (becoming Muslims as well as becoming Christians). This book is written from great personal experience. The Parshalls have spent long years in the Muslim communities of Bangladesh and the Philippines. Phil has interacted with Muslims from other countries, and he has studied Islam in great depth.

Their varied experiences come alive in these very readable accounts. Nevertheless, this book moves beyond interesting stories to give instruction on the position of women according to the *Hadith* and the interactions between the prophet Mohammed and his wives. The quotations are well researched with attention paid to the difference between the Sunni and Shia traditions.

I particularly appreciated the chapter concerning women and heaven and hell, as I have seen little written on this subject. Phil Parshall introduces his topic: 'There is an unwavering, clear

teaching in their scriptures that makes for a basically airtight case for Muslims to either revel in a sensual Paradise or suffer horrible torment in a literal Hell' (p. 87). He then discusses how women will fare in an Islamic eternity.

Lifting the Veil provides a good study tool about the world of Muslim women. The extensive bibliography includes titles from secular, Muslim and Christian authors. For training purposes, it might be helpful to add study questions to each chapter and thus suggest further research into specific questions. No book can cover every issue, but I would have liked to see this one contain more historical material on Muslim women leaders, with information on the various emancipation movements. More women writers from within the Muslim world could be mentioned. Since many are active today as sociologists, cultural-anthropologists and creative writers, they have much to contribute to our understanding of Muslim women. Unfortunately, Phil Parshall sometimes referred to several of them as 'he'.

There are two chapters devoted to Christian outreach to Muslim women and to the discipleship of new believers. Helpful methods, including the importance of oral communication and 'storying', are suggested, and stirring testimonies are told. I would like to have seen more discussion of how women in various Muslim cultures

actually learn and are encouraged to change. I would also have liked to read more about the ministries of present-day MBB women and their roles in their families, in the church and in Christian media. In several countries, it is no longer a question of one or two isolated women believers. It would be useful if the Parshalls could cite examples of church body life and growth and not just cases of exceptional individual believers.

Another shortcoming is inadequate attention to details from resources. For example, Charis Waddy (*The Muslim Mind*) is referred to on page 88 as a Muslim Arab, but her publication says she is an Australian, a one-time student at Oxford and SOAS and a Christian scholar of Islam. In another reference on page 221, Ida Glaser is quoted as speaking to a group of young Muslims. In *Partners or Prisoners*, however, it is her co-author, Napoleon John, an Anglican minister from Pakistan, working in East London, who relates the incident. Christine Mallouhi, also an Australian, becomes a 'well-traveled Lebanese woman' on page 15, when actually the quotation is from Nadia Nouhid who is quoted by Mallouhi on

pages 46-47 (not pages 65-66) in *Miniskirts, Mothers and Muslims*. However, these errors do not affect the development of the ideas presented. They just indicate the need for a careful checking of the original source materials.

In general, Phil and Julie Parshall are quite fair in the treatment of the obvious weaknesses in the Islamic position on women. They are careful to note that there "are weaknesses within the Christian world as well. At the end of the chapter on circumcision of women, the authors comment, 'The nominally Christian West has an abysmally poor record of dealing with abortion, pornography, and female abuse.' This attempt at fairness also led the authors to include a chapter on Western women who have become Muslims.

In the introduction, Phil Parshall states his objective in writing this book. He wants the reader 'to understand the Muslim woman in a more loving and prayerful manner' and 'to actively engage in witness' to such women. *Lifting the Veil* certainly provides the material to accomplish this purpose. It offers a good start for exploring each issue more fully.