

**WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT:
THE INTERACTION OF CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS TRADITION
IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM**

Bridges:

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Christianity and Islam, two monotheistic religions which had their origins in patriarchal cultures, have frequently been harnessed as natural allies in support of dominant economic models which favour men. However, the religions of Christianity and Islam also contain a “dangerous memory” – an inherent critique of the patriarchal order in the lives of their founders and in their earliest historical communal expressions. Therefore, while religion is often used by male elites in support of political and economic structures which oppress and exploit women, at the same time, Christian and Muslim women can draw upon the early inspirational moments of their religious heritage to present alternative models of development which promote the full participation and development of women in partnership with men.

Women and development

There is some evidence that such holistic patterns of economic development have existed in a pre-patriarchal past. In the early Neolithic period, with the development of hoe agriculture, women may have even been the primary producers in an economic environment which depended on close practical cooperation between men and women. Religiously the Neolithic period was associated with seeking agricultural prosperity through the mother-goddess and fertility cults. But with the emergence of plough

agriculture about 3,000 BCE, it soon became less possible for women, especially for breast-feeding women, to participate equally in agricultural pursuits.

Leila Ahmed describes how the growth of complex urban societies in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates between 3,5000 and 3,000 BCE further entrenched a developing male dominance with the rise of a class society led by military and temple elites. A family structure, designed to guarantee the paternity of property, became institutionalized, codified and upheld by the state. Women's sexuality was designated the property of men, first that of the women's father, then of her husband, and female sexual purity (virginity in particular) became negotiable, economically valuable property. The decline in women's status was followed eventually by the decline of goddesses and the rise to supremacy of male gods, together with the institutionalization of patriarchy. Throughout the period of the successive city-states power and authority belonged exclusively to the husband and father. By the second millennium polygyny was widely practiced and Middle Assyrian law required women of nobility, widows and married women to cover their heads when in the streets.

The harem of Sassanian king Khusrau I (531-573 CE), shortly before the Muslim conquest, is said to have consisted of some twelve thousand women. The court ruling was that wives, daughters and concubines had to veil, but harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil, seemingly to distinguish them from those who were under a man's protection and thus commanding social respect. Therefore, the veil served not only to mark the upper classes but more fundamentally to differentiate between "respectable" women, under male protection, and those who were publicly available and fair game. Thus the division of women into respectable and disreputable was fundamental to maintaining the patriarchal system, serving also to keep women divided from one another. Of economic significance is the fact that women took their place in the class hierarchy on the basis of their relationship (or absence of such) to the men who protected them – and not, as with men, on the basis of their occupations and their relation to production.

Christian interaction with culture

During the first Christian centuries the notion of women's seclusion, together with veiling and attitudes about the proper invisibility of women, also became features of upper-class life in the Mediterranean Middle East, Iraq and Persia. This seemed not to originate as is often suggested solely with the Persians, but to represent a coalescence of similar attitudes and practices originating within the various patriarchal cultures of the region. Each culture – Mesopotamian, Persian, Hellenic, Christian and eventually Islamic cultures – contributed practices that both controlled and diminished women, and each also apparently borrowed the controlling and reductive practices of its predecessors and neighbours. As Ahmed notes, the spread of reductive and controlling practices and misogynist ideas at this time is remarkable. Conversely, she also finds it striking that ideas which recognized women's humanity did not spread and were not copied and exchanged from one culture to another.

Like the prevailing culture which surrounded it, the Christian church absorbed many of the presuppositions and attitudes of the ancient world and endorsed male dominance, although there can also be found in its early history the seeds of an alternative vision. Despite the fact that the value placed on virginity (of women) in early Christianity was to a certain extent a rejection of physicality of the body, and had an element of misogyny in that notionally women were seen as more implicated in the body and sexuality, the narratives of the female martyrs, for example, introduced ideas which opened new avenues of self-affirmation and independence to women. Celibate, independent women – women who consulted only their own will and that of their God (whom they consulted directly) – constituted a challenge and a threat both to male authority and to the fundamental notions enshrined in the socio-religious order of the day. Some of the ideas about women fundamental to Christianity – such as the intrinsic value of the individual, the equal spiritual worth of men and women, slaves and masters, and the superiority of virginity even to wifely obedience – were subversive to the ideas fundamental to the reigning patriarchies of the age.

Cultural influences on Islam

There also appears to have been a diversity of attitudes and customs, some of which were matrilinear, in pre-Islamic Arabia. It is true, as often said, citing the Qur'an (sura 16: 58-61), that Islam brought about a ban on female infanticide and improved the position of women. But scholars such as Leila Ahmed have argued that to flag this as evidence that Islam improved the position of women in all respects seems inaccurate and simplistic. The situation of women appears to have varied among the different communities of pre-Islamic Arabia. Women were active participants, even leaders, in a wide range of community activities including warfare, religion and trade. The life of Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, seems to bear witness to this. She was a wealthy widow who, before her marriage to him, employed Mohammad to oversee her caravan which traded between Mecca and Syria. According to traditional Muslim accounts she proposed to and married him when she was forty and he twenty-five and she remained his only wife until her death at about sixty-five. Therefore, for Ahmed it seems that, although the lives of some women may have improved with the establishment of Islam, for many others their autonomy and participation were in fact somewhat curtailed when institutionalized patrilineal, patriarchal marriage was promoted as the sole legitimate societal pattern.

Nevertheless, Islam played a role in challenging the patriarchal status quo by its quranic understanding that men and women are morally equal in the eyes of God. In fact, as Ahmed admits, there is an egalitarian concept of gender inherent in the ethical vision of Islam which exists in tension with the hierarchical relation between the sexes encoded into the marriage structures of institutionalized Islam. Among the remarkable features of the Qur'an, particularly in comparison with the scriptural texts of the other two monotheistic traditions, is that women are explicitly addressed (e.g. sura 33: 35ff).

However, the gap between early ideals and the shape of the emerging community became larger as the first century of Islam passed and six collections of *Hadith* or narratives, believed to incorporate the *Sunna* (custom) of the Prophet, were collected and preserved.

Barbara Freyer Stowasser points out that the treatment of women in the *hadiths* differs in important respects from the liberative content of the Qur'an itself. She believes that the reason the Islamic transformation of women's status did not reach the equality that the Qur'an would indicate was that it met resistance in its interaction with social customs deeply embedded in the cultures it encountered as it expanded. In this respect it can be seen that both Christianity and Islam in their different centuries shared a similar fate in their early years of interaction with patriarchal culture.

Conclusion

Therefore it can be argued that while in more recent times religious tradition has been used to serve the economic and social oppression of women, religious tradition is also integral to women's challenge of these oppressive structures. There continues to be an urgent need to critique the social and economic structures of the present "rationalized" globalized economy and the fundamentalist religious movements which interact with it in ways that violate women's human rights and dignity.

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