

Riffat: Life With a Purpose

By: Donna Gehrke-White

AT AGE SIXTY-ONE, DR. RIFFAT HASSAN could be excused for slowing down. A pioneer in Islamic feminist theology research, she had been teaching for decades at two major Kentucky institutions, the University of Louisville and the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Instead, she is busier than ever, recently squeezing in a telephone interview before she flew to lead a Middle Eastern tour of somewhat apprehensive U.S. scholars. (By the end of the trip, she predicts, they will be relaxed and glad they went on the fact-finding trip that, with any luck will also be a goodwill mission.) As founder of the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan, she also finds time to defend women against honor killings, a “tradition” she abhors with a passion.

“I work eighteen hours out of twenty-four — there is so much work to do,” Riffat says.

The Muslim world is familiar ground for Riffat. She was born into an upper-class family in Pakistan, her grandfather a well-known scholar and writer. Her father, however, was traditional in his views. He loved his daughters and felt it best that they marry at age sixteen, their marriages arranged by family. Two of Riffat’s older sisters were, indeed, married as teens. “My father was a very kind man but he was part of a patriarchal society,” Riffat says. She would have shared the same fate had she not rebelled. Her mother, a feminist in her own right, supported her.

After she finished high school at an Anglican school in Pakistan, Riffat was off to study at the University of Durham in England. She earned her doctorate by age twenty-four, was teaching at the University of Punjab in Pakistan in the mid-1960s—a career that would have been unusual even for a woman in the United States—and she married. “My choice,” she points out.

She and her husband had a daughter and came to the United States in the early 1970s, but making a living was tough. Riffat found herself doing any work to survive, including ringing up groceries at a supermarket. That didn’t last long—a day. But eventually she got lucky and learned of an opening at the University of Oklahoma, where she taught for two years before going to the University of Louisville.

By then her marriage was breaking up, having lasted only a few years. “I knew so little of myself and my culture, there was no chance it would work,” she reflects. “There is no point in staying in a bad marriage.” In any case, she says, “Your family doesn’t necessarily have to have a man.”

She is, however, grateful that this brief marriage gave her a daughter. There were, though, rough times ahead as a single mom. She followed a route familiar to many American working women: babysitters when her daughter was young, followed by day-care centers and preschools. By evening she was exhausted. “I think ultimately it made me stronger. It made my daughter stronger, too. But it was very difficult in the beginning. I made so little money.”

Mother and daughter were close and remain so today even though they are often thousands of miles apart. Her daughter is now an actress with a career in India and Pakistan. (Riffat herself owns a home in Pakistan.)

Meanwhile, she had found her life’s work—feminist theory and Islam. “That has been my major work as a theologian for more than thirty years,” she says. “I came to feel that on the basis of my research the Quran does not discriminate, that the majority of the Muslim women lack religious education. The tradition has always been interpreted for women by men. The major mission of my work is to educate women.”

She disputes some translated passages in the Quran’s text that denigrate women. One, Surah 4, speaks of men as the “managers of

the affairs of women” and says that women must be “obedient.” Reading the same passage in Arabic, Riffat discovers that linguistically *qawwamun* has been misinterpreted. To her tutored eye, it refers to “those who provide a means of support or livelihood.” Accordingly, Riffat sees this verse as an exhortation to men to financially support their wives who will bear their children.

She compares this misinterpretation to how Paul’s admonishments to women in the Bible’s New Testament have been mischaracterized by generations of Christian leaders to promote a patriarchal point of view.

More than ever before, Riffat believes, Muslim women must educate themselves about their faith. “In my judgment, the importance of developing what the West calls ‘feminist theology’ is paramount today, not only for Muslim women but also Muslim men. Unjust social structures and systems of thought make a peer relationship between men and women impossible. It is extremely important for Muslim women activists to realize that in the contemporary Muslim world, laws instituted in the name of Islam cannot be overturned by means of political action alone, but through the use of better arguments.”

To make her points, Riffat speaks directly. Today’s average Muslim woman is “poor, illiterate, and she lives in a rural environment.” To reach her, Riffat believes lofty talk about human rights is not the answer. The better way is to remind her “that God is just and merciful” and that as a creation of this Supreme Being she is entitled to being treated with justice and dignity. “I have seen the eyes of many Muslim women light up when they realize what possibilities for development exist for them within the framework of the beliefs which define their world.”

She is just as honest about how her belief in Islam has propelled her forward. “My whole life has been full of struggle and if I didn’t have faith I don’t know what I would have done.”

She also believes that knowledge of the Quran can help Muslims counter the extreme right-wing or anti-religious groups who have “hijacked” Islam in many Muslim countries. Such people do not represent “the vast majority of Muslims who are religious without being fanatic, narrow-minded, or inclined toward violence and terrorism.”

Riffat saw what she calls the “Islamization of Muslim societies”

spread “from country to country in the late 1970s and 1980s.” From Iran to Afghanistan, these extremists came with patriarchal baggage. “It was very detrimental to women. I began to see how people were going to misuse religion against women.”

Education is the key to stop this abuse of Islam and to promote peace. In that spirit, Riffat worked hard to help the University of Louisville win a State Department grant to educate professors from the Muslim world about the United States and American Muslims. As part of what the grant supports, she will also take American professors to Pakistan and other Muslim countries for similarly instructional visits.

At first, the program was met with a lot of skepticism, she admits. American scholars didn’t want to go to the Middle East. “They were so scared,” she says. But those who did make the trip were transformed after they returned, having seen for themselves that most people in Muslim countries aren’t extremists.

The scholars from South Asian Muslim countries have been equally surprised by their visits to the United States. As Riffat explains, “Since 9/11, America has been perceived as being very much against Islam, and in Muslim countries one finds a lot of anger against the war in Iraq.”

But Pakistani scholars soon discover that Americans “are just like themselves,” as Riffat puts it. “They find kind people, good people. They make a lot of friends.”

And they discover that American Muslims are diverse. When they visit some American mosques, they find people from twenty nationalities praying together. “This is an experience they would never have in their country. They find the diversity quite astonishing, just as they do the openness of Americans.”

In 1999, Riffat took up the fight against honor killings when she was asked by the television program *Nightline* to offer commentary on a BBC documentary that graphically showed teenage girls or women being burned or mutilated by their own male family members in Pakistan to restore “honor” to the family. Many of the women had done nothing to deserve such brutal punishment. Riffat says it is a centuries-old tribal custom that is being carried on today by impoverished and uneducated rural villagers. Among them are even some

women who think that their daughters or daughters-in-law should be killed if they are found to be adulterers or caught looking at another man. Even more horrible is the fact that some men may fabricate evidence so they can get rid of a wife, sister, or daughter they no longer want.

"After I was on *Nightline*, I received e-mail from around the world from people asking how they could help stop these crimes," Riffat says. "We began an international network and support group, the major objective of which is to highlight the nature of these crimes. Pakistanis were in a state of denial."

Since then, she says, her group has documented thousands of cases. She met with Pakistani president Musharraf and found him sympathetic to helping end honor killings. He began denouncing the practice publicly and in January 2005 signed a law to outlaw honor killings, making the crime punishable by death.

Still, Riffat remarks, "Domestic violence is a problem around the world, including this country. Many people place very little value on the lives of women."

The solution, she says, is empower the victims. And that is why Riffat, entering her seventh decade, isn't thinking of retiring to a simpler, easier life. No, she is on a flight to Pakistan or teaching a new generation in Louisville, as her faith leads her to work as hard as she did as a young scholar.

"Faith gives you a certain structure and meaning to your life. There is a purpose for human life. This is serious business."