

Women in Islam and Christianity: A Comparison

Riffat Hassan

I. Fundamental assumptions and theological questions

The study of women in the context of any one religious tradition – be it Islam, Christianity or any other – is a vast and complex enterprise. The comparison of women in the context of the world's two largest religions – Islam and Christianity – hardly seems possible given the scope of this paper. The fact that both 'Islam' and 'Christianity' refer not only to religious traditions but also to multifarious cultures (encompassed by the terms 'the world of Islam' and 'the world of Christendom') makes the topic even broader and more difficult to address in a few pages. Any attempt to give an over-generalized or simplified overview of the way in which 'Islam' and 'Christianity' (understood in both their ideal/theoretical and historical/practical aspects) have perceived women is likely to be too reductionist in nature to be meaningful. I have chosen, therefore, to address the multi-faceted and wide-ranging subject in terms of three foundational assumptions which have had a deep impact on ideas and attitudes regarding women in the Islamic and Christian traditions.

The belief that men are superior to women characterizes all the major religions of the world, including Islam and Christianity. In the case of Christianity and Islam, this belief is rooted in the three foundational assumptions or myths referred to above. These are: (a) that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib and is therefore derivative and secondary ontologically; (b) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as 'Man's Fall' or expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence 'all daughters of Eve' are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion and contempt; and (c) that woman was created not only from man but also

for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance.

There are three theological questions to which the above assumptions may appropriately be regarded as answers. These are: 1. How was woman created? 2. Was woman responsible for the 'Fall' of man? 3. Why was woman created? Theoretically speaking, the Islamic and Christian religious traditions differ significantly in the way in which they answer these questions. But practically speaking, both Muslims and Christians have, in general, been patriarchal in their mind-set, creating societies in which men are regarded as the norm and in which women are considered to be unequal and inferior to men.

It is not possible, within the scope of this article, to deal exhaustively with any of the above-mentioned questions in the context of Islam and/or Christianity. However, an attempt is made in the brief discussion of each question which follows to indicate significant similarities and differences in the way in which the Islamic and Christian traditions, in general, have responded to three foundational assumptions/myths/questions.

II. How was woman created?

The biblical account of the creation of the first human pair consists of two different sources, the Priestly (dated the fifth-century BCE) and the Yahwist (dated the tenth century BCE), from which arise two different traditions which are the subject of an on-going controversy amongst Christian scholars. The belief that woman was made from Adam's rib is rooted in the Yahwist writer's account of creation in Genesis 2.18–24. While Jesus' own attitude to women was positive, and in Mark 10.6 he indicates an affirmation of woman-man equality in creation, the formulators of the Christian tradition, in general, have interpreted the Yahwist account of creation to assert woman's inherent inferiority to man. St Paul is undoubtedly one of the most important formulators of the Christian tradition. His attitude to women has become the subject of heated debate in modern times. Certainly his statements on the issue of man-woman relationship are marked with a certain ambivalence, perhaps even inconsistency. For instance, his use of the Yahwist story of creation to argue woman's subordination to man in I Corinthians 11.3–9 is inconsistent with his message that all believers are equal which is contained in Galatians 3.27–28.

That woman's secondary creation rendered her ontologically inferior and subordinate to man, in accordance with the deuterio-Pauline tradition, is heavily stressed in Christian patristic writings and in the first seven

ecumenical councils. Of particular significance is the negative impact on women of the writings of *Augustine* and *Aquinas* who were influenced by Paul as well as by the dualistic, androcentric ideas found in Greek-Hellenistic sources. The idea that women were made from 'a bent rib' with 'many carnal abominations' was used by misogynist Inquisitors to condemn 50,000 women as witches and sentence them to death in the period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A common thread running through the writings of major formulators of the Christian tradition including the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox, is the idea that woman is inferior to man either on account of her creation from man's rib, or her role in the 'Fall' or as a 'helpmate' to man. Such patriarchal ideas extend into the twentieth century and may be seen, for instance, in the writings of the influential Protestant thinker Karl Barth. Not until the emergence of 'feminist theology' in recent times has a serious challenge been presented to negative interpretations of the Genesis texts relating to women which have dominated the Christian tradition for almost two thousand years.

The ordinary Muslim believes, as seriously as the ordinary Christian, that Adam was God's primary creation and that Eve was formed from Adam's rib, even though this myth has no basis whatever in the Qur'an, which in the context of human creation speaks always in completely egalitarian terms. In none of the thirty or so passages that describe the creation of humanity (designated by generic terms such as '*an-nas*', '*al-insan*', and '*bashar*') by God in a variety of ways is there a statement that could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. The Qur'an notwithstanding, Muslims believe that Hawwa' (the Hebrew/Arabic counterpart of Eve) who, incidentally, is never mentioned in the Qur'an, was created from the 'crooked' rib of Adam, who is believed to be the first human being created by God. Here it needs to be mentioned that the term 'Adam' is not an Arabic term, but a Hebrew term which is a collective noun referring to the human species rather than to a male human being. In the Qur'an also, the term 'Adam' refers in twenty-one cases out of twenty-five to humanity.

If the Qur'an makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman – as it clearly does not – why do Muslims believe that Hawwa' was created from the rib of Adam? It would appear to be the case that in ways yet unresearched, the Yahwist account of woman's creation became incorporated in the Hadith literature which is the second source of the Islamic tradition (the first one being the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be God's Word). There are six 'ahadith' (traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) in the two most authoritative Hadith collections by

Imams Bukhari and Muslim, which state that woman is either created from a rib or is like a rib which is crooked and can never be straightened. Although in theory the Qur'an can never be superseded by Hadith, in the context of woman's creation this appears to have happened.

III. Was woman responsible for the 'fall' of man?

Muslims, like Christians, would generally answer this question in the affirmative, though nothing in the Qur'anic text warrants such an answer. Here it may be noted that in Genesis 3.6 the dialogue preceding the eating of the forbidden fruit is between the serpent and Eve (though Adam's presence is also indicated, as emphasized by feminist theologians), and this has been used by formulators of traditional Christianity to cast Eve into the role of tempter, deceiver and seducer of Adam. In the Qur'an, the 'Shaitan' (Satan) has no exclusive dialogue with Adam's '*zawj*' (mate), nor is there any suggestion in the text that Hawwa' being tempted and deceived by the 'Shaitan', in turn tempted and deceived Adam and led to his 'Fall'.

It is difficult to overemphasize the negative impact on Christian women of the traditional interpretation of the story of the 'Fall', which has been used to perpetuate the myth of feminine evil. Through the centuries Christian women have borne the greater share of the burden of 'fallenness' which has been associated since Augustine with sexuality and the idea of original sin. In the framework of Qur'anic theology, since Adam was always meant to be God's vicegerent on earth, as stated clearly in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 30, there is no Fall from heaven to earth or any mention of original sin. Despite this, Muslims, like Christians, have often regarded women as 'the devil's gateway', finding support for their misogynistic views in 'ahadith' which though lacking in authenticity continue to be popular.

IV. Why was woman created?

The idea that woman was made not only from man but also for man has been much emphasized by traditional Christianity. The Qur'an on the other hand, emphasizes that creation as a whole is 'for just ends'. Humanity, fashioned 'in the best of moulds' comprises both women and men who are equally called upon by God to be righteous, being assured that they will be equally rewarded for their righteousness.

In spite of the Qur'anic affirmation of man-woman equality, Muslim societies, in general, have never regarded men and women as equal,

particularly in the context of marriage. The alleged superiority of men to women that permeates the Islamic (as also the Christian) tradition is grounded not only in Hadith literature but also in popular interpretations of some Qur'anic passages such as Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 34.

Conclusion

There is hardly any doubt that women have been discriminated against by patriarchal Christianity as by patriarchal Islam. However, the re-reading and re-interpretation of significant women related Biblical and Qur'anic texts by feminist theologians has shown that it is possible to understand these texts in more than one way, and that – in fact – understanding them in egalitarian rather than in hierarchical terms is more in keeping with the belief, fundamental in both religious tradition, that God, the universal creator and sustainer, is just to all creation.

“Women in Islam and Christianity: A Comparison,” in *Ecumenism*, 1994, an issue of *Concilium*, an international review of theology in German, English, Spanish, French, Italian, Dutch and Portuguese, published in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, Volume 3, 1994, pp. 18-24.