

Islamic Feminism as articulated by Fatima Mernissi and its Implications for Christian Mission

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Abstract

This paper seeks to evaluate missiological approaches to Muslim women in the light of the analysis of Moroccan Islamic feminist, Fatima Mernissi. The Christian perspective on women's status and role in Islamic societies is essentially etic and mission thinkers have been criticised for misunderstanding Islamic cultures, particularly in their view of women. In studying the emic approach of Fatima Mernissi, the paper aims to gain an "outsider's inside" perspective and to use this as a benchmark by which to evaluate current missionary approaches to Muslim women.

Section one summarises and analyses Mernissi's central arguments in regard to the situation for women in Islam, the roots of the problem and the solution needed. She identifies the understanding of female sexuality and laws in regard to marriage as two of the major issues.

Section two provides an etic view by summarising the situation for Muslim women from the perspective of current missionaries, using Fran Love's *Longing to Call Them Sisters* as an example, followed by an analysis of the commonalities and divergences between the two perspectives. This serves to reveal in what ways the missionary (etic) understanding might assume Mernissi's (emic) insights in its approach to Muslim women. This leads into the final section where the consequent implications for mission will be discussed and suggestions made.

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to evaluate missiological approaches to Muslim women in the light of the analysis of Moroccan Islamic feminist, Fatima Mernissi. A Christian understanding of Muslim women is by nature an etic one and Western missionaries have been subject to heavy criticism for their alleged misunderstanding of Islamic cultures and in particular their misunderstanding of the role of women. This forms part of a wider critique of Western understanding of Islam. According to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), profound misreadings are long-held and deeply embedded in Western readings of Arab-Islamic peoples.¹ In studying the emic approach of Fatima Mernissi, the paper aims to gain an "outsider's inside" perspective and to use this as a benchmark by which to evaluate current missionary approaches to Muslim women.

Mernissi's voice is respected and influential, arguably having a key role in creating the pressure needed for the change to Moroccan law in regard to women's rights in 2004. The study's aim is not to critique Mernissi's perspective. However it must be acknowledged that she stands outside an orthodox Muslim position and can be best categorised as a liberal feminist. Moreover, it is important to note that challenges to Mernissi come from within the Muslim feminist movement as well as from outside it. Probably the most extensive critique of Mernissi's arguments comes from Katherine Bullock who, like fellow feminist Leila Ahmed, disputes the notion that the veil is a symbol of women's oppression. Bullock accuses Mernissi of failing to contextualise how people enact Islam differently in different times and places and of being reductive by not recognising the multiplicity of discourses around veiling.²

Bullock is right that to make generalisations about the state of women in Islam that are universally true is a flawed enterprise: Islam is not monolithic. Mernissi's cultural, personal and religious position must be acknowledged. Mernissi's writing is focused on and shaped by her home land of Morocco where her sociological research is based. It is further shaped by the School of Maliki jurisprudence in operation there. Mernissi makes it clear that her motivation is informed by her own negative experience of growing up in a harem and her search for the source and remedy of her powerlessness.³ At the same time, these experiences, and Mernissi's considerable research provide an authentic, emic perspective. If, as Bullock suggests, the Islam that Mernissi presents is harsh, it is helpful to remember that Morocco's representation of Islam assumes a moderate political expression compared to many others.

The basis for the Christian approach to Muslim women is the publication arising from a Consultation on Ministry to Muslim Women, 1999, *Longing to Call Them Sisters* (edited by Fran Love and Jeleta Eckhert.) The consultation, meeting in Mesa, Arizona, involved forty participants representing sixteen different mission agencies. As a record of the presentations and discussion of current mission practitioners, it provides an authentic insight to contemporary approaches in mission to Muslim women. At the same time, it is heavily anecdotal, with different contributors sharing their experience from different parts of the Muslim world, and although there is a strong agreement on many issues, it does not contain a fully unified perspective.

Section one provides an emic view by summarising Mernissi's central arguments. It will analyse what Mernissi describes as the situation for women in Islam, the roots of the problem and the solution needed. Three main publications form the basis for this outline: *Beyond the Veil* (1985), *Women and Islam* (1991) and *Women and Islamic Memory* (1996.) Section two

1 A good discussion of this appears in Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*, 1992: 150-55.

2 Bullock, Katherine, *Rethinking Muslim Women and The Veil*, 2003: 139

3 Mernissi, Fatima, *The Harem Within: Tales of a Moroccan Girlhood*, 1997: 3

provides an etic view by summarising the situation for Muslim women from the perspective of current missionaries. It uses *Longing to Call Them Sisters* as its basis. It will be followed by an analysis of the commonalities and divergences between the two perspectives which will suggest how well the etic missionary approaches understand and take into account the emic view. This will lead into the final section where the consequent implications for mission will be discussed.

Fatima Mernissi's Analysis:

1. The Situation of Women in Islam

The primary issue for women in Muslim societies, according to Mernissi, is a set of laws and customs that ensure women's status remains one of subjugation. Primary amongst these are the family laws based on male authority. Numerous Muslim states, including Morocco, have signed the U.N. Declaration for Human Rights. This states that men and women have equal rights in relation to marriage. Yet traditional Muslim law (shari'a) does not grant these rights. Thus a conflict exists between modern demands for equality and traditional Islamic patriarchy. Moreover, modernisation is frequently seen as synonymous with Westernisation. Because Islamic identity, particularly that of radical groups, is often defined in antithetical relationship to the West, the traditional status of women is constantly being reaffirmed as an important marker of authentic Islam. Mernissi acknowledges the negative impact of colonialism in creating this situation: "The psychological result of foreign powers' intervention into Muslim legislation was to transform *shari'a* into a symbol of Muslim identity and the integrity of the *umma*." ⁴ Thus the struggle for greater social and political power for women is part of a much wider struggle for the assertion of post-colonial Islamic identity in the modern world.

Female Sexuality

Mernissi suggests the significant difference between the struggle for women's liberation in the Arab Muslim world and that same struggle in the Western world is rooted in differing perceptions of sexuality. Where traditional Western patriarchy has seen women as passive and inferior, female sexuality within Islam is understood as active and dangerous. The struggle within the Islamic world is not focused on proving that women have equal capacities to men but on the mode of relatedness within the sexes. Indeed, belief in the abilities of women can be seen clearly in the fact that feminism within Morocco has been led by men seeking a more effective economy: The solution to Morocco's economic weakness is the education of women and their contribution in the workplace. ⁵

In traditional Muslim perception, it is the threat of *fitna* (chaos) posed by women's powerful sexuality that has resulted in the need for strategies to contain their power. Heterosexual love is dangerous to Allah's order. ⁶ Women's unrestrained sexuality distracts men from their social and religious duties. The rebellion intrinsic to female sexuality manifests itself in two central ways. The first is that of *quaid*, meaning premeditated and carefully conceived cunning. In the Quran (Sura of Yusuf) it refers to a woman's decision to commit adultery. ⁷

4 Mernissi, *Beyond The Veil*, 1985: 21

5 Ibid: 14. Here Mernissi is particularly focusing on the writings of Qasim Amin.

6 Ibid: 19

7 *Woman's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, 1996: 56

This notion of woman's de-stabilising power is invoked in daily situations, from everyday market haggling to ministerial meetings, whenever a woman negotiates subtly or makes a well-judged remark.⁸ The second is that of *nushuz*, meaning rebellion against male authority. In the Quran⁹ this specifically refers to women refusing to obey their husband in the matter of the sex act.¹⁰ It is considered so serious that it entitles men to use violence against women when "all violence between believers is formally forbidden."¹¹

Consequently, society can only survive by controlling women and fostering male dominance via the institutions of polygamy, repudiation and sexual segregation. These were evident in the working of *shari'a* into the *Code du Statut Personnel*, the modern Moroccan Personal Status Law (PSL), which was moderated to give greater rights to women only as recently as 2004.

Polygamy

Polygamy highlights the discrepancy between the control of male and female sexuality. Fornication (*zina*) is a crime under Islam. Yet the institution of polygamy, while "civilising" female sexuality, allows male sexuality to remain promiscuous. It entitles man to satisfy his sexuality and indulge it to saturation; women are simply agents in the process.¹²

The psychological impact of polygamy is twofold: Firstly, it enhances men's perception of themselves as primarily sexual beings and the sexual nature of the conjugal unit. Secondly, it is a way for a man to humiliate the woman. In bringing in another woman, he is proclaiming that his current wife is unable to satisfy him.

Whilst in Morocco, statistically, polygamy is decreasing, its assumptions are still at work even within monogamous households for example through threats levied by husbands at their wives.¹³

Repudiation

By repudiation, Mernissi is referring to the right of a man to divorce his wife immediately and without having to provide justification. Morocco is typical of Islamic states in re-enacting this seventh century Islamic law. The role of the judge is not to review the husband's decision but limited simply to registering it. Conversely, women do not have the same rights. A woman's decision to end her marriage is subjugated to the judge's decision and approval.

The laws on divorce, therefore, ensure the dominance of the man over the woman. Moreover, the basis for repudiation, argues Mernissi is similar to that of polygamy:

Whereas polygamy deals with the intensity of the male's sexual drive, repudiation deals with its instability. Repudiation prevents the man from losing his sexual appetite through boredom. It aims at supplying a new set of sexual objects, within the framework of marriage, to protect him against the temptation of *zina*.¹⁴

8 Ibid

9 Verse 34 of Sura 4 is particularly important in this discussion.

10 Mernissi, *Woman's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, 1996: 156

11 Mernissi 1996: 156

12 Ibid: 49

13 Ibid: 116

14 Ibid: 49

In a similar way to polygamy, what is perceived as male need is placed above consideration of the woman. Moreover, the institution encourages a view of woman as primarily a sexual (and reproductive) agent. Yet at the same time, Mernissi argues, because men are socialised to expect a thorough satisfaction of their sexual desires, any restriction on that fulfilment results in a high psychological price. This is not the case for women who from an early age are socialised to accept their sexual limitations. In this sense, she suggests, the self fulfilment of men is just as impaired and limited as that of women.¹⁵

Segregation of the sexes

Segregation of the sexes refers to the systematic prevention of interaction between men and women not related by blood or marriage. In the traditional Islamic mind, the world is clearly divided into male and female space. With a few exceptions, for example, visits to saints' shrines, female space is limited to the domestic domain. The use of the *hijab* ensures that when women enter a male space they are "invisible."¹⁶

Sexual segregation provides one of the main pillars that control sexual behaviour. Yet in modern Arab societies this distinction, particularly in urban areas is breaking down, with more women entering traditionally male space for education and work, rejecting the veil and determining their own lives. Mernissi argues that in Morocco this has led to a period of anomie – deep confusion and absence of norms.¹⁷ This anomie is created by a gap between ideology and reality. The result is a high level of generational conflict particularly over the issue of love marriage. For deeply embedded in Muslim consciousness is the notion that love between men and women, and particularly between a husband and wife, is a deadly enemy of the Muslim order.

Marriage

Mernissi argues that Islamic society encourages men to assume the role of master rather than lover within a marriage relationship.¹⁸ Indeed, a husband has religious duty to command his wife and this is embodied in his right to correct her by physical beating.¹⁹ Moreover, a wife cannot legally demand respect or love. In Morocco, until very recently, the PSL included in the list of a wife's duties in marriage, fidelity, obedience and deference towards the parents of her husband and his close relatives. In contrast, no moral duties were required of the husband.²⁰

In addition, there are many ways in which intimacy is prevented from developing between husband and wife. The sexual act is considered polluting and regulated by ceremonies and incantations: The couple must face away from Mecca, the direction of God and at various points during intercourse, God's presence should be invoked by the man.²¹ The wife's mother-in-law also provides a crucial function as a barrier to intimacy in marriage. She usually plays a decisive role in the choice of bride for her son, lives with the couple and acts as friend and teacher of the bride. Importantly, argues Mernissi, for a Muslim man, his mother is the only woman he is permitted to love.²² This love takes the form of lifelong gratitude. Muslim marriage does not represent a point in time when a son relinquishes ties to

15 Ibid: 173

16 Ibid: 143

17 Ibid: 97

18 Ibid: 113

19 Ibid: 111

20 Ibid: 109-10

21 Ibid: 113-4

22 Ibid: 121

his mother's "apron strings" as in many societies. Instead, the bond between son and mother is strengthened through the son's marriage.²³

Mernissi does not simply argue women are subjugated because man's devotion to Allah is threatened by temptation to commit *zina* (have sexual relations outside of marriage). Rather, she argues the ultimate threat to devotion comes from erotic love *within* marriage, which has potential to rival the emotional attachment due to God alone.

Conflict with Modernisation

Despite shifting patterns in Arab societies which have seen an increasing number of women in the workplace, the attitudes of men to women at work are still shaped by Medieval laws and values. Women are not seen as having an economic dimension. This is the privilege and monopoly of masculinity. Many Moroccan males see women who work outside the home as potential whores and their husbands as economic failures.²⁴ Thus there is once again a schism between ideology and reality.

On another level, Mernissi highlights the fact that the education and autonomy of women is essential to the development of a country. Her comments resonate with the considerable research that shows women's education leads to lower birth rates, lower child mortality and successful micro-enterprise development:²⁵

Until we arrive at the conception of woman as an equal and responsible citizen...as a resource to be managed and as a talent to be developed, every development project in the Arab world will be doomed to failure.²⁶

2. The Roots of the Problem

Ultimately, the roots of female subjugation in Islam do not lie in the Koran, in the example of Muhammed, or in Islamic history, but in the conflict between women's rights and the interests of the male elite.²⁷

The Politics of Subjugation

Mernissi makes frequent reference to the contemporary appropriation of the seventh century law system, largely codified under Abassid rule, and the way it is understood to be the only authentic interpretation of Islam: indisputably *God's law*. She, like many other Islamic reformers, rejects this view in favour of an understanding of Islam that recognises the Medieval system as the culturally conditioned product of a human process of debate and reasoning (*ijtihad*) and thus legitimately subject to constant revision and re-examination through *fiqh* (the science of Islamic law). In fact, she notes, many other aspects of Medieval *shari'a* have either never been properly implemented by Islamic rulers or by now have been

23 Ibid: 122

24 Mernissi 1996: 64

25 See Meyers, *Walking With the Poor*, 1999: 65

26 Mernissi 1996: 55

27 Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 1991: ix

considerably reformed, with family law as the glaring exception. Moreover, the “fossilization of the family model and reference basis is a deliberate political choice.”²⁸

Today the issue, at root, is still one of democracy.²⁹ Indeed, Mernissi describes the systematic funding of conservative movements, that were launched as a pan-Arab state programme in the 1980s, as a “counter-democracy offensive”³⁰ and a means by which leaders diverted attention from over-population and soaring unemployment.³¹ The campaigns to order women to veil were:

at the same time the medium and the message as Macluhan would say, ie shut up and stay invisible. And the message was for both sexes, although only one was used as a passive actor in the political theatre scene.³²

Women, she claims, are an easy group to manipulate, in part because of the rich tradition of misogyny within Islamic history. It is this misogyny rather than the egalitarian message and practice of Muhammed that has been revived and technologically backed by oil-rich emirs and shaykhs in recent decades.³³ In other words, there is plenty of material within the religious scriptures and classical history to sustain human rights but this is not within the interests of the ruling male elite who use those vast resources to serve their own ends.

The Example of Muhammed

Using a range of Islamic sources, Mernissi paints a picture of Muhammed as a man who lived humbly and transparently among his people in the city of Medina. Physically, his home adjoined the mosque with no clear division between domestic, public and religious

space. His wives moved through these spaces freely, had public roles and accompanied him to war.³⁴ For example his first wife Khadija, far from not having an economic dimension to her person, was a wealthy business woman and Muhammed frequently sought her wisdom and advice;³⁵ Similarly, Umm Salama, a member of the Quraysh aristocracy, was consulted as an authority on matters of vital concern to her community.³⁶ Muhammed's youngest wife, A'isha, held political power, leading an important uprising after his death.³⁷

The Muslim women of Medina, like men, had the status of Companions (sahabi) of the prophet and could speak freely with him. Yet the egalitarian aims of Muhammed faced strong opposition,³⁸ and these aims ultimately threatened the survival of Islam. Muhammed's relationship with his wives was a particular target for attack:

His desire to live his relationship with women as a constant and privileged experience was used by his political enemies to attack him, to wound him, to humiliate him, and finally to make him give up his aims for equality of the sexes.³⁹

28 Mernissi 1996: 73

29 Ibid: vii

30 Ibid: viii

31 Ibid: ix

32 Ibid: xii

33 Ibid

34 Mernissi 1991: 104

35 Ibid: 102

36 Ibid: 116

37 Mernissi, “Women's Rights in Islam” in Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, 1998: 116

38 Mernissi 1991: 150

39 Ibid: 163

Mernissi characterises Umar, the close Companion of Muhammed and later Caliph, as a fiery misogynist who led the men of Medina in their resistance to Muhammed's egalitarian project.

The process of the confinement of women began with the imposition of veiling for women when on the streets. It was a practice encouraged by Muhammed as a concession to Umar when there was much disorder and violence in the city. For Muhammed, it “represented the exact opposite of what he had wanted to bring about. It was the incarnation of the absence of internal control.”⁴⁰ Yet, claims Mernissi, this *hijab* “that hides women instead of changing attitudes”⁴¹ was to cut short a brief burst of freedom and overshadow Islam for the next fourteen centuries.⁴²

The Hadith and Quran

After the death of Muhammed a systematic collection of his sayings, (hadith), was begun in the context of political violence, interminable civil wars and schisms.⁴³ There was an increase in fabricated hadith as men sought to justify themselves and gain the upper hand through recourse to alleged words or actions of the dead prophet. Alongside the desire of male politicians to manipulate the sacred, was the fierce determination of scholars to oppose them through the elaboration of the *fiqh* – a “*science of religion*” entailing concepts and methods of verification and counter-verification.⁴⁴

What results is numerous hadith with varying levels of authenticity. Among the most reliable hadith are those verified by Al-Bukhari who collected 600,000 hadith and after meticulous research, retained only 7,257 as authentic. Yet, claims Mernissi, the scientific scepticism he employed has all but “disappeared today.”⁴⁵ Even hadith classified as authentic (*sahih*) are open to question and must be “examined with a magnifying glass” for “only God is infallible.”⁴⁶ With this rationale in place, Mernissi launches into an examination of misogynistic hadith. Using criteria for the reliability of hadith from Malik (founder of the school of jurisprudence followed in Morocco) she dismisses hadith that are frequently used to marginalise women and calls into question the integrity of those to whom these hadith are attributed.

Mernissi's arguments also rely on her questioning of some traditional Quranic interpretation. She insists that interpretation must be done in the light of historical context: particular rulings are only valid in particular situations. Mernissi uses the method of *asbab al-nuzul* (the occasion of a verse's revelation) to explore the reasons why a verse was revealed and the implications for application. Her understanding of the splitting into two of the Muslim concept of space through *hijab* (curtain) is heavily dependent on the context she argues for its origin in surah 33:53. According to Mernissi, the *hijab* was originally meant as a barrier between two men, not between a man and a woman. It was only later made a dividing line between the sexes under the influence of Umar.

40 Ibid: 185

41 Ibid: 188

42 Ibid: 188

43 Ibid: 39

44 Ibid: 43

45 Ibid: 45

46 Mernissi, “Women's Rights in Islam,” in Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, 1998: 12

3. The Solution

Mernissi concludes that women's aims are not equality with men but a “global rejection of established sexual patterns”⁴⁷ for both genders. In achieving this revolution, perhaps the greatest barrier to change is that women are seen to embody dangerous individualism or bid'a (innovation.) Innovation alters the laws, the sacred order – which is seen as eternal. A believer can only reinterpret, he cannot create, for creation is the monopoly of God.⁴⁸ Thus when a woman asserts her individual freedom, she challenges the whole community and sacred order. Moreover her individualism is associated with Western capitalist, consumerist individualism and dissenting women are thereby labelled as Western agents.⁴⁹

The solution lies in the Muslim world's relationship with the past which needs to be carefully re-examined. It is “the most painful wound devouring Arab creative energies.”⁵⁰ The past is read selectively and egalitarianism is wrongly seen as an import from the West rather than a true part of the Muslim tradition.⁵¹ Mernissi bitterly asks her fellow Muslims “Why is it that 'our Arab past' stops in the ninth century?”⁵² Once again she accuses the male elite: “Those who claim the only 'authentic' cultural heritage comes from the Medieval period...have a vested interest in repudiating all the newer models and cultural frames of reference that appeared in later centuries.”⁵³

Historical argument therefore is crucial to the rights of women. Modern Muslims need to be reminded of the precedent set by women in the past. Early Muslim historians gave considerable exposure to women in their writings. These writings show women as active participants and fully involved partners in historic events, including the crucial emergence of Islam.⁵⁴

Analysis of Missiological Approaches:

Christian Approaches to Ministry Among Muslim Women

This section will examine the outcome of the Christian Consultation on Ministry to Muslim Women (1999). With the exception of one,⁵⁵ the contributors are all active in ministry to women in various places in the Islamic world. Therefore the material forms a good basis for exploring current Christian approaches in mission to Muslim women. I will firstly summarise the situation for Muslim women from the perspective of these contributors and then evaluate commonalities and divergences with the emic perspective of Fatima Mernissi.

C.M. Amal suggests that the felt needs of Muslim women are not those that hit the headlines, but like women anywhere, they are those that affect the home. For “Muslims, Christians and

47 Mernissi 1985: 176

48 Mernissi 1996: 119

49 Ibid: 110

50 Mernissi 1991: viii

51 Ibid

52 Mernissi 1996: 73

53 Ibid

54 Ibid: 92

55 Diane Colby does not describe herself as a missionary but as “a researcher in the social sciences with experience among Muslims.” (Love and Eckheart, eds., *Longing to Call Them Sisters*, 2000: 64)

all other women are concerned about the stuff of daily life. Women think and act and react like women.”⁵⁶ Feelings of insecurity, fear and powerlessness expressed by Middle Eastern Muslim women in the survey carried out by Amal are not necessarily the result of those women being Muslim,⁵⁷ but are mainly due to their political situation.⁵⁸ For different reasons, these feelings are also common, if not more widespread, among women in the West.⁵⁹ Debi Bartlotti's experience in medical work on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan gives her a different perspective. She focuses on women in crisis and identifies abuse, divorce, polygamy, displacement and refugee life as issues. The common thread in these is threefold: Women experience a sense of powerlessness, fear, and an identity that is derivative; that is, it not based on their essential self as created by God. As symbols and representatives of honour and of Islam, women “pose the greatest risk to Muslim men and culture.”⁶⁰

Julia Colgate, speaking from experience amongst lower class women in S.E. Asia, claims that Muslim women commonly have a feeling of vulnerability. This is evident because they confess they are fearful, they confess they feel powerless and they actively seek spiritual power through the practices of folk Islam to meet their felt needs.⁶¹ Diane Colby argues that Muslim women are dominated by the fact that they bear the honour of the household and patrilineage.⁶² Moreover, in reformed Islam, there is renewed emphasis on the whole Quran and Hadith, both of which are “full of passages that denigrate women.”⁶³ Finally, Lea Ruth, from an East Asian context, identifies fear as that which characterises the heart of Muslim women.⁶⁴ She breaks this into three types: fear of the shame; fear of powerlessness, particularly against spiritual forces; and fear of rejection “by a male-ego-focused community.”⁶⁵ Women have a secondary place in the practices of formal Islam, and find power in the “animistic issues in life,” particularly in roles such as healers, midwives and diviners.⁶⁶

The writers almost all identify both powerlessness and fear as key experiences of Islamic women. The root reasons suggested for these vary but women's political and social situation is a common factor. A number of contributors comment on the role of women as bearers of honour and in consequence also often bearers of shame. Their fears are related to this role in society, for example, fear of gossip that may tarnish their reputation. Also asserted by the majority of writers is that women seek power through the practices of folk Islam. The contributors generally focus on women's emotional and spiritual needs. Their ministries emphasise the role of prayer and of friendship evangelism between women, with the ultimate goal that Muslim women would receive freedom in Christ from all that confines them.

56 Amal, C.M. “Current Issues Affecting Muslim Women,” in Love and Eckheart, eds., *Longing to Call Them Sisters*, 2000: 14

57 Ibid

58 Ibid: 15

59 Ibid: 16

60 Bartlotti, Debi, “Muslim Women In Crisis,” in Love and Eckheart, 2000: 27

61 Colgate, Julia, “Muslim Women and The Occult,” in 37

62 Ibid: 69

63 Ibid: 71

64 Ruth, Lea, “Understanding the Spiritual Hunger,” in Love and Eckheart: 81

65 Ibid

66 Ibid: 91

Commonalities and Divergences

Gender Relations

Many of the experiences of Muslim women documented in the missionary material resonate with Mernissi's theory of female sexuality in Islam and with her claims that women are institutionally confined because they pose a corrupting threat to men. The missionary material focuses on the emotional and psychological impact of this on women. There is little overt comment about the impact on men although there are a number of places where it is inferred that men enjoy their privileged position in the social structure. Mernissi, in contrast, emphasises that traditional sex models are damaging for both sexes. She identifies ways in which they emasculate men, enforcing expectations of masculinity that men are unable to meet (or have met by others) in a modern world. The ensuing gap between traditional ideology and present reality makes men victims as well as women. In addition, socialisation that fosters distrust between the sexes is degrading for both men and women and thwarts the development of the whole of society.

In a similar way to Mernissi, Amal acknowledges the process of change taking place in many Muslim countries and its impact on women's patterns of work. Mernissi however argues that although the confusion and anxiety triggered by change has damaging results in the short-term, modernisation will ultimately serve to benefit women because traditional systems are breaking down and reopening the issue of female rights in Islam.

The Role of Folk Islam

Perhaps the greatest area of commonality between Mernissi and the missionary material is in the recognition that women seek solutions to their powerlessness through folk Islam. "A visit to a saint's tomb, an ongoing relation with a supernatural creature, can be a genuine attempt to mediate one's place in the material world"⁶⁷ argues Mernissi. Drawing on Weber's definition of power as the chance of a person to realize their own will in a communal action, she concludes that women's collaboration with saints is "definitely a power operation."⁶⁸

In line with Ruth and Colgate, Mernissi argues that one area in which women seek almost total control is reproduction and sexuality. This is not surprising since they are central to the patriarchal system's definition of women. Significantly, pregnancy and childbirth are uniquely female experiences. The exclusion of men provides space for women's power and autonomy to flourish. At the same time, whereas Mernissi suggests women's involvement with the supernatural has an entirely therapeutic emotional impact, the Christian view argues that Muslim women ultimately become controlled by the rites and demands of the supernatural system and they fear the consequences of getting ritual details wrong.

Mernissi's analysis is focused on activities centred around saints' tombs. She argues that they have less of a magical role than a sociological one. Both male and female saints were frequently of humble origin and resisted hierarchical knowledge, as such, they are figures with whom illiterate and marginalised women easily relate.⁶⁹ Indeed, "sanctuaries which are the locus of anti-establishment, anti-patriarchal mythical figures, provide women with space where complaint and verbal vituperations against the system's injustices are allowed and encouraged."⁷⁰ The saint becomes the medium through which resentments are channelled

67 Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, 1996: 27

68 Ibid

69 Mernissi 1996: 30

70 Ibid: 31

and solutions sought. Consequently, women's anger is not directed at challenging the source of their resentment: the structural injustice in the outside world.

The danger of women's involvement with saints and intermediaries is therefore not a spiritual one, as suggested by the missionaries, but a political one. Mernissi uses a Marxist argument to suggest that the saint in the sanctuary helps women adjust to the oppression of the system. Saints act as the neutraliser of discontent, depriving it of its potential to combat the formal power structure.

Inadequacy of the Eitic Approach

Finally, there are places where the missionary material suggests too superficial a reading of Islam. It is inadequate to simplistically assert, as Diane Colby does, that the Quran and Hadith are “full of passages that denigrate women.” This view does not take into account any distinction between these two authorities or the interpretive approaches of Mernissi and other liberal Muslims. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that meaning drawn from Christian scriptures is dependent on hermeneutical principles and that passages in the Bible can be read as “denigrating women.” Indeed, it ignores the fact that Bible and Christian tradition *have* been used to do this – as Mernissi is not slow to point out.⁷¹

The missionary material aims to present an empathetic presentation of women's situation in Islam, however, it also highlights the inadequacy of an etic perspective. In places, it is evident that the stereotyped notion of Muslim women as victims undergirds some of the material. This is implied particularly in the *Thinking Through the Issues* sections, for example: “How our hearts weep for the abused women in Islam! There are so many more incidents of abuse among them than in the West!”⁷² The comment makes a sweeping statement that assumes the supremacy of the West in regard to an issue that is notoriously difficult to analyse statistically. On the other hand, in an effort to avoid presenting Muslim women as victims, Amal can be accused of treating the impact of Muslim family law too glibly. In stating that in countries where polygamy is banned, men take mistresses instead, she suggests that outlawing polygamy has no benefit.⁷³ Yet, Mernissi argues that polygamy institutionalises humiliation of women whereas adultery is always seen as transgression. While Amal is right that changing the law cannot change men's hearts and actions, she fails to acknowledge the way law legitimises and reinforces modes of thinking and acting.

Implications for Mission:

The Role of Folk Islam

Missionary practice needs to take account not only of the spiritual powers working through the system of folk Islam but the sociological role that it plays in providing a space for women. Rick Love estimates that while seventy percent of men are influenced by folk Islam, that figure for women is more like ninety-five percent.⁷⁴ It is certainly true that the power women seek through the intervention of saints and mediums can be found in the experience of Christian faith. Interestingly, it is possible to argue that the Pentecostal church flourishes in

71 Ibid: 75

72 Love and Eckherat 2000: 30

73 Amal 2000: 17

74 Love, Rick, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God*, 2000: 22

marginalised and dis-empowered communities in Latin America because the spiritual power found there meets the need for control over their lives that people have not experienced in society at large. Moreover, as Chesnut argues, it is possible for the power that “lies at the experiential core of Pentecostalism”⁷⁵ to be experienced alongside oppressive leadership structures.

Musk similarly asserts that Muslim women can find solutions to their vulnerability through security in Christ and through their influence as prayer warriors.⁷⁶ The relationship with the Holy Spirit is immediately accessible. Like folk practices, it is not dependent on hierarchical knowledge. Yet, unlike folk practices, neither is it dependent on religious specialists: “Even the most uneducated Christian woman can know the mysteries of the universe because she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁷

On the other hand, individual women are often themselves religious specialists. Many women hold specific positions in Muslim communities which give them authority in matters pertaining to folk religion.⁷⁸ These positions, as Mernissi suggests, are usually in relation to sexuality and reproduction. Midwives and sorceresses specialising in love magic are two important examples. Mission needs to consider how the loss of status for such women will be handled if they choose to follow Christ and how disruption of female power structures will be created by others rejecting their authority. Moreover, it needs to consider the sociological function of holy places. If Mernissi is correct in asserting that these are spaces where women are genuinely free to move and express themselves, the impact of calling women to reject these places must be planned for.

Overall, Mernissi's scholarship in this area suggests two challenges for mission. The first is that expressions of Christian faith need to be carefully contextualised not just to fit expressions of orthodox Islam, from which women are marginalised, but to fit expressions of folk Islam, where women occupy a central place. Fear of association with the occult cannot mean that this does not happen. Indeed, where the felt needs of people in regard to prosperity, perpetuity, and power are not addressed adequately by missionaries, folk practices continue alongside a veneer of Christianity as has happened in many mission churches in Africa.⁷⁹

One issue here is likely to be that of women taking leadership roles in Muslim background believer churches. Women need to be released and trained to teach other women in a way that reflects the reality of gender relations in the Muslim world. Implementing a traditional Western ecclesiology of males only as elders, reinforces the patriarchal system already in place and is also inadequate in a context where men and women are not used to meeting in religious gatherings. Fran Love acknowledges that although discipling and beginning the church is the most crucial phase to establishing the church, “we have done very little strategic thinking about how our women fit in to all of this.”⁸⁰

The second challenge Mernissi's scholarship presents is that Christian faith cannot simply replace folk practices as the opium for women's ills. If all that happens is that women's anger at structural injustice is neutralised by their Christian faith, then the gospel will have been reduced to a message of individual salvation and hindered from realising its full transforming power. Mission must maintain a holistic focus, addressing the injustices of society and the development of women as an integral part of establishing the kingdom of God.

75 Chesnut, Andrew, *Born Again In Brazil*, 1997: 170

76 Musk, Bill, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 1989: 76

77 Strong, Cynthia, “Deep Knowledge: Understanding a Popular Muslim Worldview” in Strong and Page, eds., *A Worldview Approach to Ministry Among Muslim Women*, 2006: 40

78 Musk 1989: 118

79 See Anim, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, 2003: 94

80 Love, Fran, “Church Planting That Includes Muslim Women”, *Seedbed* XV No 2, 2000: 13

Gender Relations

Missionaries need to be honest about the history of misogyny in the church and the way that the Bible, like the sacred texts of Islam, has been used to oppress women. Rather than becoming a stumbling block in mission, this acknowledgement can be used as a bridge to explore the root causes of men's oppression of women. Indeed, it is here that we find Mernissi's analysis congruent with that of the Bible. Both trace the problem of male oppression to a human desire for power. For Mernissi, those who confine women are the male elite – that is, those who have power and do not want to lose it. In addition, the central problem in Muslim societies is the mode of relatedness between the sexes. In both of these conclusions, Mernissi echoes the narrative of Genesis 3.

Genesis 3 not only reveals the very act of wanting to take power and be “like God,” as the root cause of sin but teaches that the distorted relations between the sexes are the direct result of the fall and curse. The Eden narrative shows “the first signs of mutual estrangement and the brutalising of sexual love.”⁸¹ In Genesis 3:16, we see how God's original plans for men and women are now profoundly disfigured. “‘To love and cherish’ becomes ‘to desire and to dominate.’”⁸² Far from being ordained in God's original plan for creation, women are subject to male domination as a result of sin. These distorted power relations are damaging to both genders. It is therefore no wonder that Mernissi identifies the mode of relatedness between the sexes as the primary problem of society. Moreover, she also refers to the need for inner change. Her argument is that rather than women being hidden by the *hijab*, men should take hold of the original Islamic ideal and practice internal control.

Missionaries need to emphasise biblical teaching on this essential issue and allow their own lives to reveal the healing of this pattern. The gospel begins to redeem this relationship between men and women. The power for internal change is possible only through new life in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Both sexes are fully unified in Christ (Galatians 3) and called not to seek control but to submit and love (Ephesians 5.) The self-sacrificial love shown by Christ for the church becomes the model for a man's love for his wife. This is a radically different understanding of marriage to that presented by Mernissi as the traditional Muslim view.

In Christian understanding, heterosexual love is not a threat to man's love for God but an expression of it and intrinsically linked to the love between humans and God. For this reason, intimacy between the sexes is fostered by instruction that the man must leave his father and mother to be united with his wife (Matthew 19:5.) The bond between a husband and wife is not easily dissolved either by a woman or a man:

Marriage is to be forever, and it is not dependent on the wife remaining young and healthy, or even bearing children. Jesus did not teach things that were practical for the needs of men: he spoke of God's perfect intentions for both man and woman.⁸³

The implication is that a redeemed marriage is one of the most powerful tools available in ministry to Muslim women. Whilst missionaries may fall short of Christ's ideal in marriage, their marriages, and the gender relations within the church at large, have the potential to speak powerfully of God's love. This is not an area explored at all in *Longing to Call Them Sisters* which focuses exclusively on individual women witnessing to other women. It raises a number of practical issues. Firstly, it suggests that married people are extremely important in the mission and that the quality of their marriages are a primary part of their ministry.

81 Kidner, Derek, *Genesis*, 1967: 67

82 Ibid

83 Glaser and John, *Partners or Prisoners? Christians Thinking About Women and Islam*, 1998: 247

Secondly, it suggests that Muslim women need to be able to witness the difference between these unions and the model of marriage with which they have been socialised. How possible this is when missionaries only minister to their own gender is questionable.

On the other hand, in countries where segregation of the sexes is practised, the notion of men witnessing to Muslim women is problematic. It tests the boundaries of contextualisation. Yet, while the testimonies of missionary women are important, the implications of Mernissi's work are that the conduct of Christian men towards women is likely to be a more powerful witness. The patterns of work in an urban setting may provide an appropriate context for this. Moreover, in some Muslim cultures, there is likely to be scope for a married couple to witness as a team to other married couples. Where this is not possible, ways for men to witness to Muslim women without involving face-to-face meetings should be explored. Examples of this might be recorded testimonies of men or the circulation of contemporary stories that focus on men working out their relationships with women in a way that is faithful to Christ's teaching.

Reducing Barriers

Finally, strong resistance to Western influence in the Islamic world suggests that significant - though not insurmountable - barriers to the gospel are unavoidably created by Western missionaries because of their colonial history. Mernissi states that any challenge to the traditional order, particularly by women, is associated with the dangerous individualism of the West. The global church needs to think strategically about the kind of missionaries that are best suited to minister in this context. Missionaries from countries that have a greater community focus in their culture and that do not have the recent colonial history of the West should be encouraged and equipped for mission. The Chinese church, for example, would be well placed to understand and to encourage converts accused of betraying their people and disturbing social harmony.

Recommendations

Good missionary practice requires living with the consciousness that our understanding as outsiders will only ever be approximate. It calls for humility that resists any notion of being an expert and continuously returns to emic perspectives so that people are allowed to tell the own story of their lives. This requires recognition of the plurality of expressions of Islam. Missionaries need to acknowledge the distinction between the ideal of Islam and its practice in the reality of people's everyday lives. In this, we need to be honest and recognise the commonalities of Islam and Christianity, seeing also the gap between the teaching of Christ and the practice of the church, particularly in regard to women.

Taking on board the emic view of Mernissi means recognising the centrality of the mode of relatedness between the genders as a key to mission. More thinking needs to be done about how the biblical model of marriage is communicated. Possible means for men to witness to women in a way that is culturally appropriate need to be pursued. In addition, the sociological function of folk Islam in the lives of women should be reflected in mission practice and strategic thinking done about the role of women in Muslim background believer churches, particularly in regard to leadership.

Finally, research into the comparative impact on Muslim women of missionaries from Western and non-Western cultures is recommended. The emic view suggests that the worldwide church needs to think globally not only about unreached peoples but the global patterns of sending nations. This may well necessitate rethinking the allocation of resources. If missionaries from non-Western nations are found to be less inhibited in establishing the Kingdom of God in Muslim countries, richer Western nations may need to support them through the commitment of financial resources.

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