
In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, popular books on Islam have been appearing at a fast rate. Most of them deal with the political dimension of this world religion. Thus far, only a few of these titles have treated the subject of the status of women in Islam. In December 2001, I watched with great interest Brian Lamb, the host on C-Span, interviewing Bernard Lewis about his book, What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle East Response. Near the end of the interview, the host asked Lewis about the reasons for the decline of Islam during the modern era. After listing several factors, he said:

Personally, I think that one of the major factors is the difference in the treatment of women. And for me, the first and strongest case is that put by a Turkish writer called Nama Kamal in an article published in 1868. He said, “The main reason for our backwardness as compared with the West, is the way we treat our women; thereby depriving ourselves of the energies and talents of half the population.”

Certainly about half a billion Muslim women deserve more attention and study. A major work on this subject appeared in 1978, Women in the Muslim World, edited by Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie and published by Harvard University Press. Then, in 1995, Geraldine Brooks published her Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women. A year later, Judith Miller wrote, God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting From a Militant Middle East, where she included some up-to-date information about the role of women in that part of the Islamic world.

Much as we may learn from these well-publicized works, none of them were done from a Christian perspective. Thus, we may be thankful for the work of Phil and Julie Parshall who have written this very informative book on Muslim women. They embarked on this task with a desire to motivate Western Chris-
tians to bring the saving message of Jesus Christ to Muslim women. The Parshalls have spent many years as missionaries in Bangladesh and the Philippines.

In the introduction, Phil Parshall addresses the reader with these challenging words:

Work through the concepts, theological positions, and actual positions of Muslim women as presented in this book. And then draw your own conclusions. Hopefully, at minimum, my writings will assist you in understanding the Muslim woman in a more loving and prayerful manner. This, along with prompting you to actively engage in witness to these “daughters of Ishmael,” constitutes the focus and direction of *Lifting the Veil*. (16)

The authors lift the veil on the world of Muslim women in sixteen chapters: “Muhammad and Women,” “Fundamentalism,” “The Veil,” “Modernity,” “Heaven and Hell,” “Folk Practices,” “Circumcision,” “Sex,” “Marriage and Polygamy,” “Married Women,” “Mothers and Their Children,” “Divorce,” “Western Converts to Islam,” “Witness and Conversion,” “Discipleship,” and “The Path Ahead.” As we may notice from the title of these chapters, the first thirteen acquaint us with both the Islamic text and the practice regarding this topic. By text, I refer to the Qur’an as well as the Hadith (tradition). Phil Parshall quotes at length from these authoritative sources that inform the Muslim faith and give direction to all aspects of life, including the role of Muslim women within the Islamic Umma. The book is replete with anecdotes and experiences that the authors relate as they illustrate the relationship between the Islamic faith and life.

In the first chapter, “Muhammad and Women,” the following paragraph puzzles me.

And now we come to the indisputable historical figure of the Prophet Muhammad. He was born, he got married, he gathered a significant following, and then he died. There are no dissenters to this set of facts. But controversies abound as we seek to fill in the details in interpretation of this man’s sixty-two years in the desert of Arabia. Lest we as Christians be overly judgmental of the contradictions and enigmas that follow, may we be reminded of the myriads of interpretations that we have dogmatically asserted regarding the person of Jesus Christ! (21)

To begin with, the controversies in the early history of the Church were doctrinal and were related mostly to the person of Jesus Christ. After Chalcedon (451 A.D.), three positions emerged: the Orthodox, the Monophysite, and the Nestorian understandings of the person, natures, and will of Christ. Before that, at Nicea (325 A.D.), the deity of Jesus Christ was asserted, and Arianism was condemned. Certainly, there were no “myriads of interpretations.” On the other hand, the controversies in the early history of Islam were primarily political. They had to do with the Caliphate, i.e., the succession to Muhammad. I fail to see any equivalence between the christological controversies in the early
church and the details in the life of the prophet of Islam as they may be gleaned
from the Qur’an, the authentic Hadiths, or his biographies that were compiled
more than a century after his death!

In the chapter on modernity, we are informed about the shocking silence of
the majority of Kuwaitis in the aftermath of a terrorist attack on the life of the
dean of the medical school at Kuwait University. His faux pas was that he did
not allow women students to keep their veils on during certain procedures at
the school. The explosion killed the neighbor’s gardener and destroyed his
car. In commenting on this senseless act, Phil Parshall writes:

How does a religion that espouses high moral and ethical standards ever tol-
erate a power segment within its inner core to be so cruel and so brutal? How
can Islam dictate the overturning of regulations that affect the basic
hygienic standards of a prestigious university school of medicine? . . . Where
is the overwhelming protest of the events that occurred at Kuwait
University? Silence. An acquiescent silence or perhaps a silence birthed in
fear. (83)

To read Lifting the Veil is an experience. It is as if you have undertaken a fact-
finding tour of the lands of Islam and have enquired personally of the way
Muslim women live, work, and think about life. It is much more than that, how-
ever, as we notice from the last three chapters of the book. For example, in
chapter 14, “Witness and Conversion,” we have arrived at the main part of this
work. I quote from the introductory paragraph:

In a sense, what has been written prior to this chapter has been the easy part.
Now comes the challenge of struggling with the higher spiritual issues. What
is the best way to share our faith with the women of the veil? How can we
build bridges into their lives with integrity? What are the points of contact
that will open up an understanding of the Gospel? And finally, what evan-
gelistic strategies can we learn from Muslim women who have stepped over
the line and converted to Christ? (225)

These final chapters require serious reflection. It is here that we find our
greatest challenge. To lift the veil on the life of Muslim women should not be
motivated by our curiosity or simply as an opportunity to manifest mere sym-
pathy with the plight of half a billion fellow human beings. Our interest and
concern must be motivated by our desire for their salvation. The book ends
with such a much-needed emphasis:

We rest our case with the sovereign Lord of the past, present, and future.
Faith pushes the borders. It prays, it believes, it perseveres. As we seek to navi-
gate through the fog, may we be committed to two responses: (1) On the
macro level, let us continue to tenaciously pray for Muslim women world-
wide; and (2) on the micro level, may we probe for the ways and means to be
involved with our near neighbor in a sensitive, loving witness of salvation in
Christ alone. Hope— the very essence of our Christian faith. (267)

—Bassam M. Madany