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FORUM THE RIGHT TO LEARN

Educating Women Not Against Islam, So Please Read What Quran Says

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Guest Columnist

The issue of the right of Afghan girls and women to education has become a matter of growing international concern since the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban. Aware of the fact that in order to survive, Afghanistan needs the political and economic support of other Muslim and non-Muslim countries, the Taliban leadership has sought to dissipate the widely-held perception that it will prevent Afghan girls and women from having access to education. When questioned on this issue by journalists, Taliban spokesmen have repeatedly said that education for women will be provided according to “Islamic” norms or rules. What does this statement actually mean?

I would like to respond to this question first from a normative Islamic perspective, and second from my perspective as a Muslim feminist theologian and activist.

Muslims regard the Quran which they believe is God’s revelation to Prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE) as the most authoritative source of Islam. The Quran defines itself as a “Book of Guidance” which is addressed to “*those who think*” or “*use their reason.*” It states that God created Adam to be God’s “*khalifah*” (vicegerent or deputy) on earth. The term “*Adam*” (a Hebrew word derived from the root word “*adamah*” which means the earth) refers to all human beings and not just to men.

According to Quranic teaching, human beings, in general, have the potential to become God’s representatives on earth. However, education which is the process of acquiring or imparting knowledge is required for the actualization of this God-given potential. The Quran puts the highest emphasis on the importance of acquiring knowledge. That knowledge has been at the core of the Islamic worldview from the very beginning is attested to by Surah 96: *Al-‘Alaq*: 1-5, which Muslims believe to be the first revelation received by Prophet Muhammad. This passage reads: “*Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created - created humankind out of a germ-cell! Read - for thy Sustainer is the most bountiful one who has taught humankind the use of the pen - taught a human being what he did not know!*” This verse links the human ability to read, to know and to write, to divine bounty.

“*Al-‘Aleem*” (one who has knowledge) is amongst the most notable attributes of God mentioned 157 times in the Quran. Prophet Muhammad also “instituted learning as an incumbent duty upon his people and this established a definite educational policy for Islam.” (“Education in

Islam, From the *Jahiliyyah* to Ibn Khaldun,” by K. Seeman). In view of the pivotal place of knowledge in normative Islam, education is a prerequisite for any society that aspires to be Islamic. Generally speaking, formal education is considered to be the main vehicle for transmitting knowledge. However, from a Quranic perspective, the acquisition of knowledge involves the total person in relationship with total reality. To become a “whole” or “total” person, integration of the diverse aspects of one’s outer and inner self is required.

That men and women have been created equal by God, having the same rights and responsibilities as representatives on earth is a fundamental Quranic teaching. Not only is this not the perspective of the present-day Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, but it also is not the view of the majority of Muslims in the world. One primary reason for this is that the Quran, like the sacred texts of the other major religions of the world, including Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, have been interpreted near-exclusively by men, in cultures characterized by patriarchy.

Since 1974 when I first began to study the Quran from a non-patriarchal perspective, I have known that a wide discrepancy exists between what it says about women’s rights and what actually happens to women in patriarchal cultures which are often exacerbated by tribalism, feudalism and other misogynistic practices. There is no doubt that the Quran requires Muslim women to acquire the education needed for their personal as well as their community’s development. But at the level of ground reality, the vast majority of Muslim women remain uneducated (also poor).

However, in this day and age, it is difficult for patriarchal leaders of most Muslim societies to blatantly assert that women do not have the right to acquire education. So other means are found to prevent women from becoming educated. For instance, women are forced to observe a dress code not prescribed by the Quran. The (generally black) garment called “*burqa*” that shrouds women from head to foot, which the Taliban, as well as other conservative Muslim leaders, regard as mandatory for women, erects a barrier between public space (which belongs to men) and private space (where women belong). This barrier (literally “*hijab*”) renders women nameless, faceless and voiceless. It is obvious that women subjected to such an oppressive dress code cannot actualize their God-given potential and become God’s representatives on earth.

“*Shari‘ah*” literally means a path leading to running water where humans and animals come to drink water in safety. It is both ironic and tragic that “*Shari‘ah*” which is a way of life characterized by fluidity (not rigidity) and safety (not coercion) should be interpreted so wrongly and used to deny women their God-given rights, of which the right to education is of foundational significance.

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