

## Introduction

On September 11th, 2001, the United States of America was attacked on its own soil. Thousands of innocent people were killed in a carefully planned series of airliner hijackings with the intent of using these planes full of passengers as bombs. This plan was successful in all but one of the hijackings and the planes were deliberately flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was an audacious and terrifying scheme, carried out in the name of so-called Islam.

However, the Quran, Islam's holy book, condemns aggression, except in self-defense, and killing, except the killing of those who have personally committed murder or truly horrendous crimes. Fortunately the general public has come to recognize that these acts of terrorism are not Islamic. And an interest in understanding what Islam really is has burgeoned.

I had just finished writing a book on women's rights in Islam for fellow Muslims and those especially interested in the faith. This is an expansion of that book for a wider audience. I have tried to include more personal stories, and to give comparisons on specific issues with the Bible. In the current world situation it is critical to realize that Islam does not have just one point of view. There is as wide an understanding of the correct way to practice Islam as there is of Christianity or Judaism. It is also critical to recognize that Christians, Jews and Muslims have much more in common than not. Indeed, I personally believe that to be true of all people who are sincerely trying to follow a spiritual path. Our vocabulary may be different, but the essential meanings are the same.

I believe that there is enough new material to make this revision useful to those who have already read *Heart's Surprise*. For those who are new readers of this material, I believe that you will find here enough background from the personal experiences of my contributors and myself to truly give you a good understanding of what it can be like to be a woman in Islam... not the Islam of the terrorists, but the Islam of the Quran.



One of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me was getting a Quran from a friend who didn't want her dog to chew on it again....

Of course, I was certain that I could never become Muslim. Clearly it was insane for an enlightened Western woman to even consider such a self-destructive act.

Little did I know, on that fateful day in the mid 1970's, that the Quran's view of women is very different from what we know as the "Islamic view." In fact, of all of the scriptures, the Quran is definitely the torchbearer for women.

Not what you would expect, is it? But neither is Quranic Islam what you would expect. Most of what we know as Islamic is culturally Islamic, rather than scripturally Islamic. It is based on Arab traditions and culture, not on the Quran. Like other religious traditions, the Arabs inter-mixed their culture with divine revelation, and taught that as Islam.

How could they do otherwise? Our understanding of everything is heavily influenced by our culture, even when we believe we are being unbiased. So the manner in which we translate divine commandments into our daily lives is based on our culture.

This is as true for the Western world as it is for any other part of the world. All human beings see the world through the distorting lenses of their own culture.

However it is my belief that we are coming into a new era of understanding. Global communications allow us to view our "neighborhood" on a much-enlarged scale. We can exchange e-mail with new friends all over the world and join chat rooms with people as geographically distant as China, Norway and Australia. Now we really begin to glimpse the truth of the phrase "the global village."

In fact, now, more than ever, we are aware how much of a global village we do live in. The events in a country as distant as Afghanistan have direct impact on us today. I have heard a

number of concerned women asking how it is that women's rights were allowed to be so totally eroded in Afghanistan under the Taliban. If they had been an ethnic group, like the Jews, would the world have just stood by and watched?

I do not know the answer to that question, but I do believe that it is critical for us in the West to understand that much of what we have been given to believe are true Muslim religious attitudes towards women are NOT ISLAMIC! They go against clear teachings in the Quran.

It is critical for us to make this distinction at this juncture in history, for we are seeing a resurgence of "Islamic fundamentalism" in much of the Muslim world. I personally believe that repressive and terrorist groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda are driving much of this resurgence. The values of this movement are based in cultural tradition, not on the Quran. It is these values that allow the terrorist fringe of so called Islam to exist, and indeed prosper.

Perhaps this fundamentalist movement is driven by a fear of the current breaking down of barriers among cultures and societies. Actually, this process has been underway for a long time, starting with written language, accelerating with the invention of printing, and much later with movies, radio and television. Now this process is sped even faster by the Internet and globalization.

With new understanding comes the means of seeing our own culture with a bit more objectivity. It seems to me that this is happening all over the world, and nowhere more dramatically than in the Muslim world. Within the span of one generation, enormous changes have begun to take place for most Muslim women.

In some places, there have been backlashes and increasing suppression of women in an attempt to maintain the old order. Afghanistan under the Taliban is a prime example. Still, the overall trend has been positive, though the resurgence of fundamentalism might eventually come to counteract this progress.

Perhaps a major factor in this progress is what seems to be a growing movement to look again at the Quran as Islam's

source, rather than the recorded oral traditions of *Hadith* and *Sunna*. (*Hadith* is what has been understood to be the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and *Sunna* is what has been understood to be the practices. Neither was written down until generations after Muhammad's death.)

I will not pretend to be an unbiased source. To me there is no question that the Quran is the revealed word of God, first put into writing 1400 years ago. Even those readers who do not hold my view will find some thought-provoking concepts in the Quran. For Muslim and non-Muslim alike, the Quranic view of women is well worth investigating. This is the purpose of what I lay before you now. I hope you enjoy it, God willing!