Mondialisation.ca
Centre de recherche sur la mondialisation

Mainstream Media Islamophobia and Women's Rights in Muslim Countries

A Critical Response to the Islamophobic Accusation made by Western Mainstream Media that Islam is Anti-women

Par Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu
Mondialisation.ca, 20 octobre 2017
Global Research 27 mars 2015

Thème: Media Disinformation, Religion, Women's Rights

First published by Global Research in March 2015

Some years ago, I had an engaging discussion with one of my very insightful students of Philosophy in my university. She asked me whether Islam has provisions for women's rights and gender equity and if it has, why is it that Muslim countries are apparently anti-women in their cultural expressions as proven in the way mainstream mass media portray the customs and traditions of these Muslim countries. This perceptive question of my student deserved a candid and thorough response.

The question is actually two pronged; first, it asked whether Islam has anything to offer for gender fairness specifically to the womenry. My categorical answer to this query is a resounding "Yes!" In this article, I will extensively demonstrate why I responded affirmatively to the first part of the query by quoting pertinent provisions provided by the Qur-an for the emancipation of women. Likewise, I will endeavor to effectively respond to the second part of my student's question: assuming that there are Islamic provisions for women's rights, why are Islamic countries apparently perceived by Western mainstream media and by non-Muslims as anti-women?

Western Mainstream Media Must Not Equate the Cultural Patterns Prevalent in So-Called Muslim Countries as Necessarily Islamic

Firstly, it should be made clear to us that the so-called "Islamic culture" prevalent in many "Islamic countries" may not be truly and authentically Islamic. This may sound ironic, but this assertion is assuredly true! Upon their conversion to Islam, these countries may still have carried with them unnecessary baggage of pre-Islamic customs and traditions that are not only un-Islamic but may even be outright anti-Islamic. Hermeneutically speaking, these pre-Islamic cultural expressions and idiosyncrasies persisting in so-called Islamic countries may even inform or misinform, dictate and influence the aforesaid societies' understanding of Islam. For instance, although the Maranaws of southern Philippines are nominally referred to as Muslims, it does not follow that their customary laws on revenge-killing (i.e., *rido*) are Islamic; and although the Bangladeshi population is predominantly Muslim, it does not mean that their traditions or customs regarding dowry is Islamic. My point is this: there must be clear delineation in identifying what is a culture-bound custom and what is truly an Islamic provision as found in the *Qur-an*. This is the crux of the problem of the Western media's bias against Islam; when it judges Islam, it tends to haphazardly label the cultural patterns of

Muslim countries as Islamic cultural patterns without investigating whether or not these patterns have any warrant in the Qur-anic revelation.

At this stage of my discussion, let me say that the canons of the *Qur-an* are the normative and regulative authority by which one should base one's judgment on whether a particular custom is Islamic since the *Qur-an* is the pristine source of the Muslim *Shariah (Divine Law)* from which a given conduct is determined as either "Islamic" or "un-Islamic". It is imperative that we stop judging Islam as "anti-women" by simply basing this judgment on our observations of the cultures of these so-called Muslim countries. Only by going back to the authoritative standard of Islam, which is the *Qur-an*, can we see that far from being anti-women, genuine Islam contains sufficient provisions for gender fairness and equity.

Western Mainstream Media's Portrayal of Islam May Not Necessarily Be the Accurate Picture of Reality and May Unduly Condition Our Prejudices Against Islam

Some people may say; "But pictures do not lie! Muslim women crouching behind thick veils are powerless to assert their rights in an Islamic country." Let me say that pictures seemingly cannot lie but they can be outright selective and partial in their portrayal of things and events because they are shot at angles based on slanted or sometimes twisted frames of focus chosen by the person taking the pictures; for whatever purpose the pictures may serve him or her. Likewise, news reports can be selective, slanted, twisted, skewed and downright unfair.

How can one judge Islam and the Muslim World when one has only a limited angle or a twisted spectacle from which one bases one's judgment? Islam is both a universal and cosmopolitan way of life since Islam embraces plurality and diversity of cultures. The geographical, cultural and racial terrains of Islam's domains are very diverse indeed! Islam's realm stretches from the archipelagic Southeast Asia to the Indian Subcontinent; from the Afghanistan highlands to the Iranian steppes; from the well-watered lands of Tigris and Euphrates to the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula; from the heart of the Nile to the wastelands of African Sahara and from thence to Turkey, Albania, Bosnia in Eastern Europe and up to the various Central Asian Turkic republics.

Presently, Islam is the fastest growing religion in Great Britain, Continental Europe and the United States. It is indeed stupefying to take into account all these cultural diversities found in the world of Islam; for instance, an Indian Muslim is culturally different from a Bulgarian Muslim as a Malaysian Muslim is culturally different from an Algerian adherent of Islam.

I am not minimizing the fact that there are so-called Muslim countries that discriminate and oppress women. I think we should denounce these countries which in their patriarchalism, oppress and marginalize women. However, what is important is take into account the cosmopolitan, pluralistic and diverse world of Islam when making generalized adverse judgments on Islam as a W*eltanschauung* (worldview).

By showing this great diversity, I venture to say that it is indeed unfair for the Western media to hastily judge Islam without taking into consideration this overall picture of Islam's cosmopolitan pluralism. It is the media's solemn duty in the name of fairness to exhaust all angles of representation in as far as Islamic diversity is concerned before the media ventures to ascribe undesirable judgments on Islam and Muslims.

Western Mainstream Media must be Aware that Present Interpretations of Islamic Precepts

or Principles Implemented in "Islamic Countries" May Be Misinterpretations or Misunderstanding of the Original Qur-anic Intents and Purposes

The third point that I would like to raise in response to the first part of my student's query is this: there are interpretations of Islamic principles that are accepted as normative in a particular "Islamic" country that may well be a misinterpretation of the Qur-anic intents and purposes as envisioned by the Prophet of Islam. What I mean by this is that there are Qur-anic verses that are interpreted in terms of rigid anti-women cultural patterns prevalent among Islamic countries which upon closer scrutiny are in fact misrepresentations of the egalitarian intents of the Prophet Muhammad. Let us take the issue of *hijab* as an example. *Hijab/hijb* is an Arabic word which means to cover, to conceal, to put things in privacy. When used in relation to Islamic *adab* (ethics), *hijab* means modesty, propriety and prudence in one's dealings with the opposite sex (Cf. *Al-Qamus al Arabiyyah al Misriyyah* [Cairo Concise Arab Dictionary]. Cairo: al Maktabah Dar'ul Ilmiyyah, in the entry, *Hijab.*). Presently, in Islamic countries, *hijab* is unanimously taken to mean the literal veiling of women as in actual veiling from head to foot. However, in the original contextuality of the *Qur-anic* pronouncement, *hijab* essentially refers to the virtue of modesty in ones' dealings with the opposite sex; a command which according to Maulana Muhammad Ali, an eminent Qur-anic exegete and translator, is not only limited to women but to men as well. (Maulana Muhammad Ali, *Commentary on the Holy Qur'an.,* pp. 132-133.).

Maulana Muhammad Ali points out that the mandate for *hijab* does not primarily refer to the rigidified custom of veiling or seclusion (*purdah*) nor is its implementation limited to female believers only; *hijab* is a moral call to sexual modesty, prudence, and moderation aimed at all Muslims, men and women alike. The egalitarian basis of *hijab*, a gender-neutral mandate is found in the *Qur-an*; however, it is the interpretation or implementation of the "*hijab* principle" among Muslim countries that is misleading faulty and anti-women.

Now, let us look at the Qur-anic text exhorting for *hijab* and let us pay attention to the intent and purpose of this specific Qur-anic text:

> Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them. Allah is aware of what they do. Say to the believing women that they cast down their looks, and guard their private parts and not display their ornaments as what appears thereof; and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms (Surah Nur:30, 31).

Notice that in these verses, the command for *hijab* is given to both Muslim men and women. The verses exhort "believing men" as well as "believing women" the virtues of modesty and sexual propriety in their dealings with each other. In the course of time however, the exhortation to modesty mutates itself into a set of rigid commandments pertaining to inflexible dress codes governing women alone, i.e., wearing of thick *chador* (veil) that covers a woman's face down to her ankles. What is very disturbing in this interpretation is that the dress-code implementation is not applied to nor enforced on the "believing men" who are likewise required to observe *hijab* as stated in the above-mentioned verse. In so-called Islamic societies, the interpretation of the Qur-anic verse is skewedly and arbitrarily implemented with extreme rigidity solely on the "believing women." This situation is a sorry example of misinterpreting the spirit and the egalitarian intention of the *Qur-an* and of the Prophet of Islam.

It is in the spirit of Islamic modesty for women to dress modestly and to wear a simple head-veil that adequately covers her body, in the same way that males are to wear prudent clothing for modesty's sake. Both are required by the *Qur-an* to manifest reserve and modesty in their conduct with each other. But to discomfort women by unnecessarily insisting that they cover their whole faces, thereby impeding their movements, is altogether a strange matter which is against the very purpose of the egalitarian exhortation of the *Qur-an* for *hijab*. A simple veil on the head for the woman and a simple *fez* for the man, together with modest clothing for both, adequately fulfill the Qur-anic exhortation for *hijab*; but to go beyond this simplified and uncomplicated exhortation is already an excessive and unwarranted burden which the Prophet did not impose upon Muslim women!

Maulana Muhammad Ali strongly emphasized that the ethical imperative for *hijab* does not in any way mean hampering the movement nor does it mean inconveniencing the life of the womenry. To forcefully bring home this historical fact, a direct quote from Maulana Muhammad Ali is appropriate. The Maulana says:

> As regards the seclusion of women, the Qur-an never prohibited women from going out of their houses for their needs. In the time of the Prophet, women went regularly to mosques, and said their prayers along with men, standing on separate row. They also joined their husbands in the labour of the field; they even went with the army to the field of battle, and looked after the wounded, removing them from the field if necessary, and helped fighting-men in many other ways. They could even fight the enemy in an emergency. No occupation was prohibited to them, and they could do any work they chose. (Maulana Muhammad Ali, Introduction to the Study of the Holy Qur-an, op.cit., p. 132.).

Therefore the directive for *hijab* does not mean seclusion of women from public affairs (*purdah*) as practiced in some so-called Muslim countries. Women during the time when the Prophet of Islam was still alive and even during the periods of the Rightly Guided Caliphs of Sunni Islam were very active in the public life of the Muslim *Ummah* (faith-community).

A concrete example to prove this point is the fact that the wife of the Prophet, Hazrat Aishah Siddiqah was a teacher of Islamic sciences to both male and female Companions. Hazrat Aishah Siddiqah was considered to be the very first *mufti* (legal luminary) of Islam from whose legal, ethical and spiritual directives the Holy Companions derive rulings for the *Ummah* after the Holy Prophet's demise. Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; pp. 66-69.). It must be plainly pointed-out that the Holy Companions, in consulting a women jurisprudent par excellence, namely Hazrat Aishah, concerning legal rulings and theological opinions in the affairs of the Islamic community simply followed the Prophet's command found in the *hadith sharif* (Prophetic tradition):

> "Learn your religion from Aishah, my Humeyra (the fair-one). Listen to her words like a bee attending to his beehive." (See: Abdelhalim Abu Shaka, The Emancipation of Woman at the Time of the Prophet, Los Angeles: Muslim Women's League, 1990; pp. 150-152; quoting from thehadith sharif, Fazail-e-Sayyidatina Aishah Siddiqah [Exemplary Virtues of our Lady Aishah Siddiqah].).

As of this juncture, let it be said that the essential ethical intention of the Holy *Qur-an* is to provide social equity and equal rights for both men and women. The Qur'an clearly showed the Prophet Muhammad's unmistakable intention of treating women as equal with men by mentioning both men and women in many verses in the *Qur-an*. For instance, the *Qur-an* says:

> And the believers, men and women are friends of one another. They enjoin good and forbid evil and keep up prayer and pay the poor rate, and obey Allah and His Messenger. As for these, Allah will have mercy on them. Surely Allah is Mighty, Wise (Surah Bara'at:19).

The abovementioned verse clearly articulates equity between the male and female gender in that the Qur'an considers women and men as protectors (*waliy-yun*) to each other; both men and women are required to do pious acts as proofs of their essential equity and their intrinsic value as human persons.

Another proof of the intrinsic equity between male and female gender is the fact that men and women have their innate autonomy as persons of free volition to follow or not to follow divine commands. In the discourse of the Qur-an, both males and females are tasked with ethical and spiritual responsibilities and in the Hereafter, both will be given just requital of their deeds without taking into consideration their gender differences. The *Qur-an* explicitly declares the following verses:

> Whoever does evil, he is requited only with the like of it; and whoever does good, whether male or female, and he is a believer, these shall enter the Garden, to be given therein sustenance without measure (Surah Mu'min: 40).
>
> Whoever does good, whether male or female, and he is a believer, We will certainly make him live a happy life, and We will certainly give them their reward for the best of what they did (Surah Nahl:97).
>
> Men shall have the benefit of what they earn and women shall have the benefit of what they earn (Surah Nisa:32).

The eminent commentator of the Holy *Qur-an*, Maulana Muhammad Ali, noted that the *Qur-an*practically manifests ontological equity between males and females in its pages. The Holy *Qur-an* declares that there is no difference between men and women and both can reach the highest divine station if they practice righteous deeds. (See the Maulana's commentary of *Ahl Imran*:195, *Nisa*:124, *Nahl*:97).

A Call for Societal Advocacy and Engendered Activism: Towards a Genuine Islamic Understanding of Gender Equity according to the Gender Egalitarian Intention of the Prophet Muhammad

Given the unequivocal commitment of the Holy *Qur-an* for the intrinsic equity between men and women, why is the Islamic *Ummah* (faith-community) lagging behind in acknowledging gender equity? Why is it that all we see around are the pitiful conditions of the womenry happening in so-called Muslim countries? Let me begin answering this question by quoting a prophetic saying or *hadith sharif* of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Holy Prophet was reported to have said that;

> …the guilt of the oppressor is not lesser than the guilt of the oppressed. The oppressor is certain to be punished severely due to his injustice and cruelties committed towards the oppressed (sic). But the oppressed is likewise accountable for not exerting his utmost to fight against oppression… Similarly, ignorance is a great sin and an appeal to be excused from the law on account of ignorance is unacceptable (sic). (Amjad Soharwardi, Hazrat Baba Jilani our Master: A Humble Servant of the Blessed Prophet. Chittagong, Bangladesh: Panja Pir Pustak, n.d., p. 78.).

Based on the abovementioned Prophetic Tradition (*hadith sharif*), ignorance can be a cause of oppression. Ignorance of the real teachings of Islam, specifically ignorance of the *Qur-an* in its textual and historical contexts can lead to oppression and those who are ignorant of their rights as given in the *Qur-an* are the ones likely to be oppressed. This important point strongly calls for Muslims to know intimately their religion and likewise exhorts non-Muslims to sympathetically understand and seriously research the historical contextualities of Islamic practices as found in the *Qur-an*.

It is outright unfair for Western mainstream media to blame Islam for the misconduct of its adherents in the same manner that it is wrong to blame the whole of Christianity for the cruelty and bloody excesses of medieval papism or for the barbarism of the Catholic Counter-Reformation that produced the blood-thirsty Spanish Inquisition. On the other hand, while it is justified to claim that Western media, cultural patterns among Muslim countries, and faulty interpretations of the *Qur-an* wrongly shape our views on Islam and women, this claim should not be used as a flimsy excuse for both Muslims and non-Muslims to absolve themselves from their responsibilities and culpabilities. It is indeed high-time now for all of us to break these chains of ignorance and oppression by empowering ourselves to seriously study, research and ascertain what the pristine normative source of Islam, i.e., the *Qur-an* itself has to say about women. We, likewise, have a duty to inform others who are ignorant of these liberative provisions on the equal rights of women as found in the *Qur-an*.

Furthermore, Muslims in particular need to zealously endeavor to implement the egalitarian teachings of the Prophet, right were they are, i.e., in their own immediate cultural milieu. They need to be reminded that the social teachings of Islam are clear on this matter: *viz*, oppression and ignorance go hand in hand, hence in order to fight oppression, it is incumbent to first empower oneself with knowledge. Therefore, our advocacy for women's emancipation and gender equity should be global, all-inclusive and educative, since it is not Muslim women alone but women in general who are enslaved by sexist prejudices, patriarchal oppressions, and chauvinist discriminations.

It is already a cliché to say that knowledge is power, but I feel that we need to be reminded of this fact, time and again.

We also need to be reminded that evading our responsibility to correct erroneous notions made by Western mainstream media about Islam and women is a manifestation of weakness and cowardice. My student's perceptive query that prompted me to write this article was indeed a preliminary but vital step in the right direction—religious dialogue towards gender sensitivity. Yes, Muslims and Christians, or any persons of goodwill for that matter, can respect, cherish and celebrate their creedal differences while cooperating in the lofty goal to free women from the bondage of chauvinism, sexism, machismo and gender inequity.

The issue of gender fairness can indeed be a cooperative venture towards human

understanding, international amity and global solidarity among peoples of the world whatever their religions and beliefs may be. Let us cooperate with each other to make this advocacy for women's empowerment a living reality in our midst.

Professor Henry Francis B. Espiritu is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Asian Studies at the University of the Philippines (UP), Cebu City. His research interests include Islamic Studies particularly Sunni (Hanafi) jurisprudence, Islamic feminist discourses, the writings of Imam Al-Ghazali and Turkish Sufism. You may freely contact him at his email address: espirituhenryfrancis@yahoo.com.

La source originale de cet article est Global Research
Copyright © Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu, Global Research, 2017

Articles Par : Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu

Avis de non-responsabilité : Les opinions exprimées dans cet article n'engagent que le ou les auteurs. Le Centre de recherche sur la mondialisation se dégage de toute responsabilité concernant le contenu de cet article et ne sera pas tenu responsable pour des erreurs ou informations incorrectes ou inexactes.

Le Centre de recherche sur la mondialisation (CRM) accorde la permission de reproduire la version intégrale ou des extraits d'articles du site Mondialisation.ca sur des sites de médias alternatifs. La source de l'article, l'adresse url ainsi qu'un hyperlien vers l'article original du CRM doivent être indiqués. Une note de droit d'auteur (copyright) doit également être indiquée.

Pour publier des articles de Mondialisation.ca en format papier ou autre, y compris les sites Internet commerciaux, contactez: media@globalresearch.ca

Mondialisation.ca contient du matériel protégé par le droit d'auteur, dont le détenteur n'a pas toujours autorisé l'utilisation. Nous mettons ce matériel à la disposition de nos lecteurs en vertu du principe "d'utilisation équitable", dans le but d'améliorer la compréhension des enjeux politiques, économiques et sociaux. Tout le matériel mis en ligne sur ce site est à but non lucratif. Il est mis à la disposition de tous ceux qui s'y intéressent dans le but de faire de la recherche ainsi qu'à des fins éducatives. Si vous désirez utiliser du matériel protégé par le droit d'auteur pour des raisons autres que "l'utilisation équitable", vous devez demander la permission au détenteur du droit d'auteur.

Contact média: media@globalresearch.ca