

15 Religious Practices

Now you have a good background about women's issues in the Quran. I hope you realize no matter how traditional Muslims understand things, God never becomes unfair to women in the Quran. Actually, it advocates for the rights of women and other vulnerable people.

I have kept what for me became the most important issue regarding women in Islam until this point in our discussion. When I first learned about the religion I almost did not survive this issue.

Several people categorically told me I could not pray during my menstrual period. Also, I should not fast during Ramadan at this time (a practice we shall discuss in detail later). They told me I could not even touch the Quran during my period, much less read it.

For most women of childbearing years, these terrible restrictions on performing the crucial practices of Islam mean they cannot practice their religion for about one-quarter of the time. And things get much worse for older women going through menopause because they spot much of the time. Ironically most women become more emotional and need the calming influence of the religious practices even more during their periods and menopause.

Where do these restrictions come from? According to my informants, they come from the following verse:

They ask you about menstruation: say, "It is harmful; you shall avoid sexual intercourse with the women during menstruation; do not approach them until they are rid of it. Once they are rid of it, you may have intercourse with them in the manner designed by God. God loves the repenters, and He loves those who are clean."
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:222)

They told me I could not pray, fast, or read the Quran during my period because this verse prohibited it. What do those practices have to do with this verse? As we will see the verse deals with the intimate relations between a man and his wife.

Yes, a woman's period proves a messy inconvenience. It must have been far worse before modern "feminine needs" products. However God has always known these factors, and He never said in the Quran, "Do not practice your religion during your menstrual periods".

If you say this verse refers to more than the intimacy between spouses then you must also say God does not love any woman who can bear children. Verse 2:222 says He loves "*those who are clean*" and by traditional Islam's definition, no woman who menstruates can keep herself in that state. However, Verses 5:41 and 9:103, make it clear that God speaks of spiritual purity and cleanliness, not physical ones. In 5:41 God refers to a clean heart and in 9:103 refers to charity as a purification of those who repent of having mixed good and bad deeds.

In addition, Verse 2:223 clarifies that the Quran speaks of the intimate relations between spouses, not a woman's ability to perform her religious practices.

Your women are the bearers of your seed. Thus, you may enjoy this privilege however you like, so long as you maintain righteousness....
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:223)

The two verses together tell us God restricts sexual activity during the wife's menstrual period. To generalize from that and forbid her religious practices during her menstruation restricts her spiritual growth, for the practices cause that growth.

Because of the importance of this issue, I will deal with each of the practices in its own chapter.

Perhaps again the Torah has influenced the understanding of these verses. Leviticus 15:19-23 considers a menstruating woman unclean along with the things she touches. However, society and its ability to clean garments and other objects have changed greatly since the times of Leviticus. In Matthew 9:20-22 when a woman with a flow of blood for twelve years touched Jesus's hem, he in no way rebuked her for her uncleanness but rather praised her faith, and said that faith healed her.

I am certain God never prohibited women from doing the crucial practices of Islam for a significant portion of their lives. To me it makes no sense women should be stopped from praying Salat, fasting, and even reading the Quran during their periods. I believe this traditional restriction of women's religious practices causes much of the oppression of and prejudice against women in traditional Muslim societies.

When tradition stops women from performing the most essential rites of the religion for a significant part of their lives, no wonder multiple *Hadith* exist calling women deficient in their religion.

Traditional Muslims call the reputed sayings of the prophet Muhammad the Hadith. This Arabic word usually is translated as "narration(s)" but almost all people refer to them using the Arabic word "Hadith". The Hadith form the basis of much of the religious practice for traditional Muslims. Most Muslims have been taught that because of the Quran's difficulty they cannot understand it. Supposedly the Hadith clarifies it. My experience proved very different, however. The Quran makes things very clear and unambiguous. The Hadith I tried to read confused me and seemed unclear and inconsistent.

The word "Hadith" can refer to either a collection of narrations or an individual narration. Many individual Hadith contradict others. This should not surprise us given that no one collected and made them available until generations after prophet Muhammad's death. Until that point, Muslims orally passed the Hadith on from generation to generation. The first book of Hadith became available more than 150 to 250 years after Muhammad died. Even the experts do not know when the first collector wrote it.

Most Muslims respect Al-Bukhari as the best collector of Hadith. But his mother did not give birth to him until 194 or 198 AH in the Islamic calendar, or around 810 AD. So he could not begin his collection until more than 150 years after Muhammad's death.

As a child, my friends and I played a game. We would sit in a circle and one person would whisper something into the ear of the person next to him or her. They in turn would whisper it into the ear of their other neighbor. The whispered message would go all the way around the circle and the last person would say it out loud. Then the originator of the message would tell everyone what the original message had been. Usually, gales of laughter greeted this original message, as almost always the final message bore little resemblance to the original one.

This game shows how difficult oral transmission without introducing changes becomes. In just a few minutes our message changed dramatically. The Hadith went through generations of oral transmission.

In spite of the inherent dangers of oral transmission some advocates of the Hadith even go to the extent of saying the Hadith abrogates the Quran. That means if a given Hadith contradicts the Quran then they believe Quran is incorrect. They take the Hadith over the word of God!

This demonstrates how crucially important these sayings became in the religion of most Muslims. I mentioned Al-Bukhari as one collector of Hadith. Perhaps to try to provide greater legitimacy for each Hadith, a chain of narration is almost always attached to each one. In the last two Hadith examples quoted below, the collector of the Hadith included the name of the person from whom he got the Hadith.

An appalling number of the Hadiths denigrate women. Since traditional Muslims rely so heavily on the Hadith as a source of their religion, no wonder many Muslim cultures consider women unequal.

As examples, let me share a few choice Hadith dealing with women:

Women are naturally, morally and religiously defective.¹

Ibn Abbas reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: I had a chance to look into the Paradise and I found that [the] majority of the people was poor and I looked into the Fire and there I found the majority constituted by women.²

Abu Said a-Khudri reported Allah's Messenger as saying, "the world is sweet and verdant, and Allah having put you in it in your turn watches how you act; so fear the world and fear women, for the trial of the Bani Israel had to do with woman."³

The first name in the endnote reference for each of the above Hadith belongs to the collector of that Hadith. So not only did the collection of Hadith begin generations after the Prophet, several different people collected them.

¹ Collected by Bukhari - from Iman, 2 as per A. J. Wensinck, A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition, 1960.

² Collected by Sahih Muslim - 6597 from KITAB AL-RIQAQ (THE BOOK OF HEART-MELTING TRADITIONS) as translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui [www.iuu.edu.my/deed/hadith]. September, 2001.

³ Collected by Muslim - from Ideal Woman in Islam. by Imran Muhammad [wings.buffalo.edu/sa/muslim/isl/hadith1.html]. September, 2001.

I believe even if the followers of Hadith honestly believe in the correctness of their beliefs, they will benefit from reviewing those beliefs. Again, no one collected and wrote down Hadith or *Sunna*—the supposed sayings and actions of Muhammad—until more than 150 years after his death. In spite of the illusion they come from eyewitnesses, there cannot be certainty about the validity of any one of them.

The Quran tells us to follow the prophet Muhammad but it also tells us God forbade him from issuing any religious teachings other than the Quran:

Had he uttered any other teachings. We would have punished him. We would have stopped the revelations to him. None of you could have helped him.
(Quran: The Final Testament 69:44-47)

These verses clarify that to follow the prophet we must follow only the Quran. The only teaching he brought remains the Quran; following anything else becomes very dangerous. The next verse reinforces this thought:

This is My path—a straight one. You shall follow it, and do not follow any other paths, lest they divert you from His path....
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:153)

To summarize: The Quran's Chapter 6 Verses 155 to 157 tell Muslims of the importance of following the Quran. Chapter 69 Verses 40 to 47 tell us that prophet Muhammad did not bring anything outside of the Quran that we need to follow. And Chapter 6 Verse 153 tells Muslims not to follow any other paths besides the path given in the Quran.

From all of these verses it became clear I should follow only the Quran as my religious source. I know for many Muslims this seems a shocking concept. They have been raised with the thought that Hadith forms a crucial source in Islam. However, once again, there exists absolutely no way of verifying that any given Hadith is valid. On the other hand all Muslims agree that the Quran came as the word of God (please see 4:82 and 17:85 for example). Should we take a chance following what the prophet Muhammad *might* have said, which has to have been either distorted over time or be stories falsely attributed to him? Or should we rather follow what we know God *does* say and Muhammad truly taught? I have no doubts. I'll stick to the Quran alone.

Several verses support this point of view. This one struck me the most:

These are God's revelations that we recite to you truthfully. In which Hadith other than God and His revelations do they believe?
(Quran: The Final Testament 45:6)

For emphasis God used the Arabic word "Hadith," which, as we saw earlier, usually translates as "narration". Rashad Khalifa chose not to translate it at all. To me this verse says the Quran forms the only valid Hadith to follow. God knows the future and He knew Muslims would corrupt their faith with man-made sources. So He tells us we should follow only His Hadith—the Quran.

Remember Muhammad did not begin Islam. He followed Abraham as the following verse shows:

*Then we inspired you (Muhammad) to follow the religion of Abraham....
(Quran: The Final Testament 16:123)*

Thus, we know Muhammad followed Abraham's religion. The next verse shows all the religious practices originally came through Abraham, and Muhammad continued them. Abraham prayed:

*"Our Lord, make us submitters to You.... Teach us the rites of our religion, and redeem us....
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:128)*

God gave us the practices of our religion through Abraham. The following verse again shows us we follow Abraham's religion:

*Who would forsake the religion of Abraham, except one who fools his own soul?
We have chosen him in this world, and in the Hereafter he will be with the righteous.
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:130)*

Thus God states Islam as a separate religion began with Abraham. In fact all three major monotheistic religions lay claim to Abraham. Judaism and Christianity also view him as an important prophet. In both of those religions we see forms of the original practices given to Abraham. For example, the motions illustrated in the Jewish prayer book match those of *Salat* (the Muslim Contact Prayer) almost exactly. So do those of a priest giving Mass. Before doing the Contact Prayer the worshiper performs a symbolic ablution—washing with water as described in Chapter 17 on the prayers. Ablution remains a common practice among the three religions, and may have been the original basis for Christian baptism. Charity forms another common practice among the three religions, like fasting in some form, and the concept of pilgrimage.

To me the fact that Muslims follow the religion of Abraham proves we should be following only the Quran as a source of our religion. We do not have any Hadith to follow from Abraham, who founded our religion.

So what does the Quran, rather than the Hadith and cultural tradition, tell us as women about our religious practices? Our next chapters discuss each practice and the women's issues related to it.

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A beautiful Muslim from Sweden shares the following story. When I first met her it amazed me she became a Muslim because I had not thought of Sweden as being a country with Muslims. Then I realized she had an equal right to be amazed at my following Islam. The beauty and power of Islam do not restrict themselves to those whom we think they will. God guides those who are destined for Islam in spite of our expectations.

A Journey to Faith

Although I was curious about the Quran since I was a teenager, and had told myself that I would read it someday, the idea that I would one day refer to myself as Muslim didn't once cross my mind. I simply figured that reading it should be part of every person's basic education, as so many people in this world regarded it as their book of law.

My father was a man of travel. His job would take us to different parts of the world. Visiting him during one of his assignments in Asia, I met the man I would marry years later. Little did I know that marrying this man, and eventually divorcing him, would be a crucial part of a long journey of me finding my way to God.

I fell in love with him instantly, and was much too young and inexperienced to be cautious. I had not yet tasted the grueling consequences of seriously bad choices to fear life. So when he asked me to marry him after six years of seeing each other briefly once or twice a year, dreaming, and exchanging young promises, I held my breath for a few seconds, then said yes.

Hopeful I immigrated to start a new life with him. I was told I had to convert to Islam before we could get married. I agreed, knowing very little to nothing about the religion. He practiced the *Shahadah* with me, the phrase I had to repeat to declare my new faith, and he groomed me into answering piously and correctly to questions I might have to answer. I was also told that I had to take on a Muslim name. He chose two for me. I was amused and excited at the same time, but didn't take any of it really seriously. After all, we both knew it was all done so that we could get married.

Gathered in the room for the conversion was my father who had flown in for our engagement, several witnesses, and an Australian lady convert, who was assigned the job of guiding me through the conversion process. There was also my husband-to-be, watching anxiously from a corner of the room. I was not in any way prepared for the emotional storm I was about to experience that day. As I started uttering the words we'd been practicing together, "*Ashadu An La Elaaha Ella Allah...*" something unexpectedly happened. A powerful feeling completely overwhelmed me, and my eyes were flooded with tears. Afterwards I tried to make sense of what had happened. Was it because converting was such a profound expression of love for my husband? Something told me that this was not the case.

After this experience I found myself occasionally chanting the only 'local' Godly words I knew—the call for prayers. I would sing, cry, and talk to God during private moments. Although I'd always believed in a higher intelligence and a purpose for all that is, I was still surprised at my new activities.

Eventually, preparations for the official marriage ceremony were under way. Everything was arranged, guests were invited, and gifts arrived. One gift was a videotape. I was told "a stranger in the street" had given it to us. It was only a couple of months later however, when my brother-in-law decided to hand it over, that I finally watched it. On the tape was an eloquent man called Ahmed Deedat talking to people about the Quran. He spoke some about Jesus, which kind of surprised me since I did not know that Jesus was mentioned in the Quran. Wasn't the Quran all about Muhammad? He also mentioned

a new mathematical finding in the Quran, based on the number 19. I started asking people around me for more information about this, but to my great surprise, nobody could tell me anything.

I was sent to take lessons on how to pray and read Arabic. The Australian lady, my tutor, helped me buy my first Quran, in English. I never got down to reading it, however, as I was told that I couldn't open it if I hadn't washed in a certain way, uttering certain Arabic words. As I opened it and turned the pages, it had to be with my right hand, saying some more Arabic words. Finally I was told that I could not open it during some other specific circumstances, during menstruation being one of them. Reading the Quran was hard (I thought then). Covered from head to toe I tried to follow her instructions on how to position myself for the prayer. It felt like a very solemn moment, and I was enjoying the effort. But sitting in that peculiar position, with my toes bent in a certain way touching the floor, was much too painful, physically, to go through with it. Praying was really hard (I thought then).

Soon my tutor and I were becoming friends, and much more informal with each other. When realizing how non-religious the family I lived with really was, she said that she could not see me staying with them for very long. I was surprised at her candor, and didn't quite know what to make of her statement, as I didn't see myself as a religious person. She seemed to see something else however, long before I would.

The marriage did not last long. Mercifully, God allowed me to return to my homeland with my newborn son. The first apartment we rented upon our return, turned out to be sitting right on top of a small mosque. After settling in I decided to knock on their door to ask for information about number 19 in the Quran. They all looked puzzled, and I was starting to think that I would never find more information about it. Two years later however, as I was starting to forget all about the Quran and its code, my mother called to invite me to meet a new neighbor claiming to be Muslim. She made a point of telling me that she didn't cover her hair. After being briefly introduced I was quite taken aback when one of the first questions she asked me was: "Have you heard about the number 19?"

She gave me a translation of the Quran containing information about the code 19 the same day. That day my life changed. That day I realized that the Quran was the word of God, and I decided to become a Muslim, in my heart. Years after that brief first encounter when uttering those words to convert, I was again feeling my soul. Giving in to its needs, it was now crying of joy, shivering with life, and in need of care.

During the months that followed I remember not wanting to sleep, spending most nights reading this wonderful scripture—the Quran. It was truly an awakening and healing experience. I found answers to questions I'd always had, and answers to questions I didn't even know I had, and I was feeling whole for the first time in my life. Although it was all new and somewhat strange, it was the most natural thing in the world for me. Everything looked different in my eyes, still everything was the same.

Almost twelve years have passed since the day I decided to submit to God, the Lord of the Universe, and it still feels like my journey has just begun. It has turned out to be quite a lonely path, filled with lovely company. Lonely in the sense that, as we are

born into this world and as we leave, is how we travel in our spiritual journeys, as individuals.

—*Swedish Muslim*

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Hadith dismayed more sisters than me, as the following account from Lydia shows.

Hadith vs. Quran

I'm a dog lover, have always been a dog lover. When I began to practice the rites of Islam, I owned three wonderful dogs. A friend from dog training classes surprised me with a question. She said, "How can you be a Muslim and have dogs?"

I didn't understand the question. I had been reading Quran for several years. I knew the story in chapter 18 of the youths in the cave who slept for over 300 years "*while their dog stretched his arms in their midst.*" I knew of a verse that spoke of trained dogs and falcons (5:4). What was the problem?

This was my first encounter with *Hadith*. I didn't come through traditional Islam so I had no idea of the importance that most Muslims place in Hadith, the idea that for most, Hadith carries more weight than the Quran.

My friend was referring to a newspaper report where a Muslim taxi driver in NYC refused to allow a blind man and his seeing-eye dog into his cab because of a Hadith that said angels won't enter a room where there's a dog.

What struck me most from this incident was how blessed I was not to be bogged down in inherited traditions, centuries old, that really made no sense. This Hadith was fairly harmless, though I am sure it causes many kind, caring Muslims to never experience the pleasure of having a dog. But many Hadith are evil, derogatory toward women, and completely contrary to God's word in the Quran. I was spared ever learning most Hadith (there are volumes of them). I could enjoy the company of my dogs, knowing they are a wonderful creation of God, and at the same time enjoy the practices of my faith. Dogs and angels would happily occupy any room in my home.

—*Lydia, U.S.A.*

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The religious practices of Islam took me awhile to adjust to. However, now I cannot even imagine living without them. I see how each practice forms a gift to me from

God, my Creator. The next several chapters deal with those practices but let me try to share my experience of them as a whole.

If you have read the chapters before this one, you know that before I became Muslim my life did not run especially smoothly and my emotions tended toward fear. An emotional child, I was too sensitive to survive without a great deal of mental anguish. I believed in God but had not found a faith that really met my needs and so to some extent made up my own.

When I got my first Quran it surprised me in the way it spoke to me, as I've shared in earlier chapters. But it wasn't until I began doing the practices of Islam, which come to us through the prophet Abraham that I began to understand what the words "peace" and "contentment" mean. At that point I knew I would never leave Islam, God willing. It more than met my expectations and it completes my life in a manner I cannot put into words any more than I can adequately describe God, the Creator of existence itself.