

Christian-Muslim Relations: Texts, Past, and Present

Written Assessment n. 2

One of the most controversial issues used to establish an irreducible historical and theological difference between Christianity and Islam is that relating to the role and recognition of women in society (Moaddel, 1998; Bennett, 2008). Verses or suras are often quoted by both sides aiming to underline how women are not considered equal and to highlight a certain "discrimination" or at least subordination that is inherent in the scriptures and decreed by the texts. However, this issue is more marked regarding Islam, whose women are seen by the West as oppressed by their culture and religion (Pepicelli, 2012).

Christian online sources¹, for instance, cite the following suras to reaffirm the supposed subordinate role of women in Islam, which (so it is suggested) broadly reflect the prejudices spread in the wider social context, going beyond the theological sphere:

"Allah commands you regarding your children: the share of the male will be twice that of the female" (Surah 4:11).

It is stated that the Qur'an teaches that women should have half the inheritance of men, that their testimony is worth half that of a man (the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man), and that the majority of hell's inhabitants are women.

With respect to marriage, the unequal treatment of women is reiterated, as a man can marry up to four wives: "then marry other women of your choice—two, three, or four" (Surah 4:3).

It is also said that Muhammad did not respect this rule and that four wives were not enough for him. Therefore, he was granted permission from Allah to marry as many as he wanted. The following surah is quoted in this regard:

"O Prophet! We have made lawful for you your wives to whom you have paid their full dowries as well as those bondwomen in your possession, whom Allah has granted you. And you are allowed to marry the daughters of your paternal uncles and aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncles and aunts, who have emigrated like you. Also allowed for marriage is a believing woman who offers herself to the Prophet without dowry if he is interested in marrying her - this is exclusively for you, not for the rest of the believers. We know well what rulings we have ordained for the believers in relation to their wives and those bondwomen in their possession. As such, there would be no blame on you. And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful" (Surah 33:50).

In addition, the Qur'an would sanction the authority of the husband over the wife and would also legitimise violence:

"Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, caretaking in the absence [of their husbands] of what Allah has enjoined [them] to guard. As for those [wives] whose misconduct you fear, [first] advise them, and [if ineffective] keep away from

¹ Several non-academic sources by different Christian denominations:

<https://www.chiesadiroma.it/differenze-scritturali-tra-vangelo-e-corano/>;

<https://www.tomorrowworld.org/magazines/2014/may-june/bible-vs-quran-where-is-the-truth>;

<https://biblereasons.com/bible-vs-quran/>; <https://www.abwe.org/blog/comparing-quran-and-bible>;

<https://christiananswers.net/q-aig/quran-genesis.html>

them in the bed, and [as the last resort] beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course [of action] against them. Indeed Allah is all-exalted, all-great” (Surah 4:34).

On the contrary, regarding Christianity and the role of women, the following verses are quoted:

“Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2)

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh” (Matthew 19:4-6).

With respect to the value of women we read: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Commonly, Christian sources also claim that the first person to receive grace from God was a woman: “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God’” (Luke 1:30), just as it was a woman who announced the good news of the resurrection. According to many Christians, the Bible verses quoted above aim to reaffirm the importance of women in Christianity, unlike Islam, which aims to diminish it.

From an Islamic point of view, not only did the Qur'an sanction a clear improvement in the lives of women (Izadi, 2020; Breigheche, 2019), but it abolished widespread practices considered "uncivilised", such as female infanticide (Balsoy, 2014). The main difference between the Christian and Islamic point of view lies in the fact that the latter recognises the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity, as well as of their prophets, placing itself in continuity with the first two monotheistic religions. On the other hand, Christianity considers Islam as a "false doctrine", the "evidence" for Christians being that there is no prophecy of Muhammad's coming in the Bible (Whittingham, 2020; Beaumont, 2015), Jesus is the one and only prophesied messiah.

Regarding the position of women in Islam, scholars claim that the different treatment in some social practices (e.g., inheritance law, obedience to husband, etc.) is common in all monotheistic religions, and attribute this more to cultural practices of the period than to religion itself. Placing the root of the question in the patriarchal culture of ancient societies, Muslims demystify the view that would see Islam as the religion that “par excellence” discriminates against women.

Furthermore, since the Qur'anic suras on the role of women are subject to interpretation, the exegesis was strongly conditioned by the cultural background of the period, making it necessary to record a different interpretation for the current century, in line with a general improvement in the treatment of women in society. “Therefore, understanding and interpreting the Qur'an is a dynamic process that should be reviewed according to the needs of the time” (Izadi, 2020, p. 342).

Izadi says that there are three groups of verses on the status of women in the Qur'an. According to the author, the first group supports equality between women and men, like in the following example:

“O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you” (Surah, 49:13).

On the contrary, the second group of verses establishes a different jurisprudential law for men and women, as in the case of polygamy granted only to men, while the third group sanctions a different nature of the two sexes, according to a hierarchical order that places men before women.

The author analyses one hundred and seven exegeses from the eighth century to the contemporary era, showing how with the arrival of the twentieth century the exegesis is much more progressive than previously: “Earlier exegeses quoted some ḥadīths to prove their claim of women’s inferiority. Contemporary exegeses questioned some of these ḥadīths, either for their ascription to the source of the ḥadīth, and/or for their content when compared with Qur’anic teachings” (Izadi, 2020, p.355).

Some authors have gone further, speaking of false ḥadīths about women (Atiya, 2013; Breigheche, 2019). In her work *Faux hadiths au sujet de la femme* (False ḥadīths on women), Maryam Atiya has done a critical examination on the nature of the texts attributed to the Prophet, verifying their authenticity. The research aims to highlight the non-authenticity and incompatibility of some ḥadīths which are aimed at marginalising women, and their relationship with the Qur'an and the rest of the Sunna (Breigheche, 2019). This and other research that we will explore in the next paper has had strong repercussions on Islamic women's movements and on “Islamic feminism”, to the extent that they deconstruct the patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an, but not the Qur'an itself which, in their view, already guarantees gender equality.

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