

American Female Converts to Islam and Their Feelings of Liberation

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The common American view of Islam is that it oppresses women, takes away their rights, and degrades them to the level of men's property. Even so, since the seventh century, thousands of women have willingly converted to Islam.¹ Dr. Sherif Abdel Azeem, who has researched American female converts, estimates that the ratio of American women who convert to Islam when compared to male converts is four to one.² These American female converts say that Islam actually liberates them and gives them more power than they had ever felt before converting.

Female converts state that equality and women's rights in Islam date back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. In sixth century Arabia, many pagan practices treated women harshly: parents buried unwanted female newborns, husbands owned women as possessions, and women were not allowed to be educated.³ During the seventh century, Islamic law changed many of these practices, making the education of girls sacred and giving them the right to own and inherit property.⁴ Muhammad said that a husband had to treat each of his wives equally and that women were entitled to sexual satisfaction.⁵ Each of these examples gives these women converts fuel to state that at its heart, Islam has always had feminist aspects.

Many women who convert to Islam cite numerous passages from the Qur'an to support their belief that Islam liberates them sexually and spiritually.⁶ These passages support their right to education, to work, and to keep the money that they earn.⁷ In addition, they state that both sexes are not only equal but also complement each other. The fourth sura of the Qur'an is the sura of the women, or the *Surat al-nisa*. It reads,

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul, created, of like nature, His mate and from them twain, scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through Whom Ye demand your mutual (rights) and reverence the Wombs (that bore you), for Allah ever watches over you" (IV, 1).⁸

This passage states that males and the females are equal; they can both gain a place in Heaven, and they can both become "the vicegerent of God on earth."⁹ Another translation states, "I created you from one soul, and from that soul I created its mate so that you may live in harmony and love."¹⁰ The addition of "harmony and love" emphasizes the biological, psychological, and social complementary roles of the sexes.¹¹

American female converts also state that there is equality in the simple fact that Allah has no gender. While Muslims often refer to Allah with the masculine pronoun, he is never called "father" as he is in Judaism and Christianity. Allah's feminine traits can be seen in one of the most important of his ninety-nine names, *al-Rahman*, which means the All Compassionate. This name derives from the Arabic *rahma*; that word, in turn, comes from *rahim*, which means womb.¹²

Many female converts feel as though Islam gives them a sense of liberation and freedom that they could have never felt in their former lives. They state that wearing the *hijab* is not a form of repression, as most Americans believe, but a decision to claim their body as private.¹³ Female Muslims believe that women who dress sexually are simply using their bodies to assert power. In contrast, wearing the *hijab* forces them to gain authority by using their mind and intellect. In addition, men take them more seriously; they know that these women are modest and passionate about their religion; therefore, they take an interest in the woman's personality instead of her body. Americans often state that Muslim women have to wear the *hijab* in order to please their men; however, many Muslim women disagree, saying that the way in which most American women dress is for men, not for themselves.¹⁴

Dr. Sherif Abdel Azeem states in his article, "Women In Islam Versus Women In The Judaeo-Christian Tradition," that Islam provides a woman with "dignity, respect, and protection in all aspects and all stages of her life from birth until death in addition to the recognition, the balance, and means for the fulfillment of all her spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional needs."¹⁵ He agrees with women converts when they cite Islam as a way in which to liberate and free themselves from the restraints of modern American culture.

There is an overwhelming number of personal conversion stories by American women. Websites like *The True Religion* have countless entries from female and male converts who share their stories of conversion. Many of these stories speak about the liberation and freedom that women feel when they decide to convert to Islam. A young woman, Karima Slack Razi, speaks about her decision and its effects: "I had spent my life longing for a truth in which heart would be compatible with mind, action with thought, intellect with emotion. I found that reality in Islam. With that reality came true self-confidence and intellectual freedom."¹⁶

Another woman, Sumayya (Evelyn) Tonnellier, never understood why Muslim women covered themselves, until she converted. She tells of her feelings about wearing a veil: "Wearing the scarf for the first time made me feel as though I had more peace. I was someone...a Muslim. I was (and am) protecting myself from all evil. I felt a lot closer to Allah, because He has ordained women in the Noble Quran to cover themselves."¹⁷

However, converting is not always easy, and the converts speak freely about the difficulties of converting. In her story, Aminah Assilmi tells about how after she converted, her husband left her. He received custody of the children because of her unorthodox religion, and she lost her job.¹⁸ Another woman, Seema Imam, was estranged from her family for fourteen years after she converted, and Elizabeth Martin's family would not speak to her for six years. Elizabeth Martin also brings up another issue that is important to women converts. She admits that some people attempt to corrupt the focus of Islam. Many men misinterpret the scriptures to justify spousal abuse and other such activities; however, similar misinterpretations of religious texts are common in almost every religion.¹⁹

Even though these converts are happy with their decision, there are those who make arguments against American women converting to Islam. Jane Crosthwaite, the head of the department of religion at Mt. Holyoke College, can see both sides of the issue. Crosthwaite states, "Requiring women to be veiled is a way of erasing them from the landscape." She continues by saying that while veiling has its advantages because it solves many problems that American women have, it can also pose many dangers: "They are still part of the real world, with all its ambivalence."²⁰ In addition, the American convert has to think about the post September eleventh society in which they live. Prejudice and ignorance are the fuel for hatred, and many Americans know little about Islam or the difference between Muslims and terrorists. Therefore, being a Muslim woman in America can be very dangerous.

Women in America convert to Islam for many reasons. Many feel as though Islam is a way to freedom from the pressures that the American society places on women. Others see it as the perfect religion that encompasses every aspect of life, thus creating a more personal and intimate relationship between the worshipper and Allah. Because of these reasons, women decide to leave behind the "usual" American life and give themselves to Islam. However, many others argue that this step is irrational. Those who oppose it cannot accept that women would willingly hide themselves behind a veil and submit to men. However, for the hundreds of American female converts who decide to embrace Islam each year, these arguments are simply ignorant remarks. The decision to convert is one that they freely accept, fully knowledgeable of the problems and difficulties that are associated with their choice.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Maya Shatzmiller, "Marriage, Family, and the Faith: Women's Conversion to Islam." *Journal of Family History* 21, no.3. (July 1996): 235-32.
- ² Sherif Abdel Azeem, "Women In Islam Versus Women In The Judaeo-Christian Tradition." *The Wisdom Fund*. <www.twf.org/Library/WomenICJ.html> (22 November 2003).
- ³ Lisa Beyer, et al, "The Women of Islam." *The Muslim World*. Edited by Geoffrey Orens. (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 2003), 73.
- ⁴ Shatzmiller, 235-32.
- ⁵ Beyer, 73.
- ⁶ Geoffrey Orens, ed. *The Muslim World*. (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 2003), 71.
- ⁷ Madeleine Bunting. "Can Islam Liberate Women?" *The Muslim World*. Edited by Geoffrey Orens. (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 2003), 81.
- ⁸ Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti, "Female Spirituality in Islam," *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*. Ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 203-204.
- ⁹ Chishti, 203.
- ¹⁰ Bunting, 79.
- ¹¹ Chishti, 204.
- ¹² Bunting, 79.
- ¹³ Bunting, 79-80.
- ¹⁴ Katherine Millett, "American by Birth, Muslim by Choice," *The Muslim World*. Edited by Geoffrey Orens. (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 2003), 92.
- ¹⁵ Azeem.
- ¹⁶ "Testimony of Karima Slack Razi." *The True Religion*. <www.thetrue religion.org/karimaslack.htm> (22 November 2003).
- ¹⁷ "Testimony of Sumayya (Evelyn) Tonnellier." *The True Religion*. <www.thetrue religion.org/sumayya.htm> (22 November 2003).
- ¹⁸ "The Introduction and Decision (Testimony of Aminah Assilmi)." *The True Religion*. <<http://www.thetrue religion.org/aminah.htm>> (22 November 2003).
- ¹⁹ Millett, 92 & 94.
- ²⁰ Millett, 90.

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<www.thetrue religion.org/karimaslack.htm>. (22 November 2003).
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<www.thetrue religion.org/sumayya.htm>. (22 November 2003).
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