

Behind the Veil

Some aspects of Islam sound very familiar to Christians: respect for parents, no adultery. Other rules, however, are less so: a Muslim should not accept or charge credit, daughters should not marry non-Muslims or live away from home until married.

Perhaps some of that unfamiliarity is best symbolized by Muslim women's wearing of the veil. Though in Saudi Arabia, for example, women may earn college degrees and even run their own businesses, many go out in public only when clad in the abayya, a long, black cloak covering them from head to toe. Most also wear a veil from which only the eyes are visible through a slit. And while the dress may strike women in Canada as a symbol of oppression and restriction, many Saudi women defend it, because for them it stands for religious morality, while also providing them with the kind of security they often see lacking in our culture, where divorce or single-motherhood is common.

Since a Muslim man can't kiss even a female cousin, and certainly can't go out with other women, affairs are rare, and divorce never an issue in Saudi Arabia. Also, women wearing the veil are accorded respect, say Muslim women, and they feel protected even in such small things as having to be driven since they are not allowed to operate cars. Men must also provide for women who do not have to work if they choose not to.

Unlike in some other Muslim cultures, Saudi women often make the final decision about whom they will marry, and once they have done so, the home is seen completely as their domain, the place they rule. By Islamic law, men are allowed to have up to four wives, but few choose to do so for financial reasons and because it is difficult to treat all wives equally, as the Koran demands.

While this traditional way of life may be easy in primarily Islamic countries, Muslims living in other countries often feel embattled by the culture around them, some of which clashes with Islamic rules. Even successful and assimilated families feel the strain. To instill conservative social values, the mosque plays a central role. Children attend Arabic classes or other community events there. "Most important, the new subculture offers haven from what many Muslims see as the negative commercial and permissive atmosphere of the larger culture. Parents send teens to mosque activities to keep from dating and from common adolescent temptations" (Marquand p. 11).

Yet, in spite of efforts to counteract negative influences, there is "growing evidence of more divorce, marriage outside the faith, the ignoring of Islamic rules, generational anger, and sibling strife...While Muslim numbers are growing and an Islamic awakening is under way, tensions are also rising in the Muslim community. Many women for example, resist pressure to wear the hijab, a head covering" (Marquand, p. 10).

Sources

Marquand, Robert and Lamis Andoni. "Islamic Family Values Simmer in a US Melting Pot." Christian Science Monitor, January 29, 1996, pp. 1, 10-11.

Peterson, Scott. "Women Live On Own Terms Behind the Veil." Christian Science Monitor (July 31, 1996):1 and 10.