

## **Islam and Women**

DiPs Mon 26<sup>th</sup> October 2015 at *The Blue Mugge Pub*

These notes based on the book *Islam - an Introduction* by Carole Hillenbrand (2015), BBC *In our Time* and earlier Mugge discussions.

1. We are not likely to have present in The Churchill Room at the Mugge on Monday an expert or authority on our theme. No matter, but we'll begin by asking how much or how little we know about our theme and issues below? Were we taught anything about this at School? Should schools today have *Islam and Women* issues within the curriculum? Where?

2. Karen Armstrong in her book ***Islam - A short history*** (Phoenix, 2001) wrote this: "The emancipation of women was dear to the Prophet's heart. The Qur'an gave women rights of inheritance and divorce centuries before Western women were accorded such status... There's nothing in the Qur'an that requires the veiling of all women... These customs were adopted generations later..."

3. Carole Hillenbrand in her more recent book devotes a whole fascinating chapter to Women, (pp 247 - 273) addressing these themes: *Muslim Women and the West; The Qur'an on Women; Women in Islamic Law; Mary and Fatima - two especially venerated women; Muslim Women in Pre-Modern Times; Muslim Women in the Early Modern Era; Prominent Muslim Women Today; Women in Contemporary Society.* Any issues there of particular interest, not mentioned below?

4. A few quotes for us to engage with:

i) 'Until very recently Muslim religious scholars have mainly been men... Thus, the Qur'an ...interpreted through male experiences...attitudes and the male psyche... This phenomenon is not restricted to Muslim societies, of course...' A big general issue, here?

ii) Face veiling preceded the Qur'an ... back centuries before Mohammed: 'signs of status - An Assyrian legal text 1300BC quoted on "the veiling of respectable women".'

Words and attitudes: *the burqa, the niqab, the jilbab...* Attitudes and policies change and vary in different countries - there is a ban on wearing the full Muslim veil in France.

Dress codes can be deeply significant, disturbing and controversial generally? Why?

iii) 'There's been reverence for the Virgin Mary by Muslims over centuries... The Prophet's daughter Fatima occupies a special place in Muslim piety'.

iv) Education within Islamic countries varies enormously: women's literacy in Pakistan and the Yemen = 28%; in India 59% of Muslim women have never even attended school... But we're in a period of rapid change across the globe. 'In the middle east young women can receive a fine university education and many do... upwardly mobile, well-educated Muslim women gravitate towards careers as lawyers, doctors, dentists... in Britain, the USA and Canada...'

v) 'There are now many Muslim feminist groups. Their members go straight to the Qur'an, to look afresh at its statements about women...' The Prophet 'always permitted women to pray in the mosque'

The motto of Sisters in Islam (Nigeria) is quoted:

"You can't change the past, but you can try to change the future". Appropriate generally?

vi) Carole Hillenbrand concludes her chapter: 'Muslim women will undoubtedly figure largely in the future path their countries will take. They will aim to become full members of their societies. They have already opened the door and, at last, a brighter future beckons'.

5. Is this a striking example, to support Carole's optimism: The BBC's *Great British Bake Off* final a few weeks ago was seen by a record 14.5 million viewers. The winner, Nadiya Hussein thought she would be dismissed as a 'Muslim in a headscarf'. On the contrary this 30 year old mother of three from Luton and Bangladesh is now, according to The Daily Telegraph 'seen as a role model for young Muslims'. Yasmin Alighan-Brown, founder of *British Muslims for Secular Democracy* writing in The Daily Mail stated that 'by winning the show with such grace, humour and dignity... Nadiya has done more for race relations in the UK than any posturing politician'.