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Islam, Virgins and Grapes

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In Afghanistan, 300 brave women marched to demand a measure of equal rights, defying a furious mob of about 1,000 people who spat, threw stones and called the women “whores.” The marchers asserted that a woman should not need her husband’s consent to go to school or work outside the home.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

In Pakistan, the Taliban flogged a teenage girl in front of a crowd, as two men held her face down in the dirt. A video shows the girl, whose “crime” may have been to go out of her house alone, crying piteously that she will never break the rules again.

Muslim fundamentalists damage Islam far more than any number of Danish cartoonists ever could, for it’s inevitably the extremists who capture the world’s attention. But there is the beginning of an intellectual reform movement in the Islamic world, and one window into this awakening was an international conference this week at the University of Notre Dame on the latest scholarship about the Koran.

“We’re experiencing right now in Koranic studies a rise of interest analogous to the rise of critical Bible studies in the 19th century,” said Gabriel Said Reynolds, a Notre Dame professor and organizer of the conference.

The Notre Dame conference probably could not have occurred in a Muslim country, for the rigorous application of historical analysis to the Koran is as controversial today in the Muslim world as its application to the Bible was in the 1800s. For some literal-minded Christians, it was traumatic to discover that the ending of the Gospel of Mark, describing encounters with the resurrected Jesus, is stylistically different from the rest of Mark and is widely regarded by scholars as a later addition.

Likewise, Biblical scholars distressed the faithful by focusing on inconsistencies among the gospels. The Gospel of Matthew says that Judas hanged himself, while Acts describes him falling down in a field and dying; the Gospel of John disagrees with other gospels about whether the crucifixion occurred on Passover or the day before. For those who considered every word of the Bible literally God’s word, this kind of scholarship felt sacrilegious.

Now those same discomfiting analytical tools are being applied to the Koran. At Notre Dame, scholars analyzed ancient texts of the Koran that show signs of writing that was erased and rewritten. Other scholars challenged traditional interpretations of the Koran such as the notion

that some other person (perhaps Judas or Peter) was transformed to look like Jesus and crucified in his place, while Jesus himself escaped to heaven.

One scholar at the Notre Dame conference, who uses the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg for safety, has raised eyebrows and hackles by suggesting that the “houris” promised to martyrs when they reach Heaven doesn’t actually mean “virgin” after all. He argues that instead it means “grapes,” and since conceptions of paradise involved bounteous fruit, that might make sense. But suicide bombers presumably would be in for a disappointment if they reached the pearly gates and were presented 72 grapes.

One of the scholars at the Notre Dame conference whom I particularly admire is Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an Egyptian Muslim who argues eloquently that if the Koran is interpreted sensibly in context then it carries a strong message of social justice and women’s rights.

Dr. Abu Zayd’s own career underscores the challenges that scholars face in the Muslim world. When he declared that keeping slave girls and taxing non-Muslims were contrary to Islam, he infuriated conservative judges. An Egyptian court declared that he couldn’t be a real Muslim and thus divorced him from his wife (who, as a Muslim woman, was not eligible to be married to a non-Muslim). The couple fled to Europe, and Dr. Abu Zayd is helping [the LibForAll Foundation](#), which promotes moderate interpretations throughout the Islamic world.

“The Islamic reformation started as early as the 19th century,” notes Dr. Abu Zayd, and, of course, it has even earlier roots as well. One important school of Koranic scholarship, Mutazilism, held 1,000 years ago that the Koran need not be interpreted literally, and even today Iranian scholars are surprisingly open to critical scholarship and interpretations.

If the Islamic world is going to enjoy a revival, if fundamentalists are to be tamed, if women are to be employed more productively, then moderate interpretations of the Koran will have to gain ascendancy.

There are signs of that, including a brand of “feminist Islam” that cites verses and traditions suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad favored women’s rights.

Professor Reynolds says that Muslim scholars have asked that conference papers be translated into Arabic so that they can get a broader hearing. If the great intellectual fires are reawakening within Islam, after centuries of torpor, then that will be the best weapon yet against extremism.