Women and Islam
Week#1
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Week#1: Introduction

- Why a course about “Women and Islam”?
- Stereotypes, lack of information, media sensationalism, confusion
Historical Context and Contemporary Issues

- The events of today are better understood when looking back into history.

- Today in Canada, can we speak about the women movement without knowing the Famous Five or the suffragettes in Great Britain or the feminist waves since 1960s?
What do you know about Islam and Muslim Women?
The course objectives

- Historical perspective
- Ignite curiosity of participants
- Navigate through the literature, history books, articles, novels and biographies with some reference points
- Introduce the participants to the diverse world of “Muslim Women” and “Muslim issues”
Outline

- **Week #1**: Historical Context
- **Week #2**: To be a Muslim Women
- **Week #3**: Muslim Women in the Media
- **Week #4**: Islamic Feminism
- **Week #5**: Woman In Saudi Arabia
- **Week #6**: Muslim Women and Sharia
First Reading

Karen Armstrong

- Karen Armstrong is a British author born in 1944, known for her books on comparative religions.
- She is a former Roman Catholic religious sister.
- Muhammad a Biography of a Prophet, 1991
- Field of Blood: Religion and History of Violence, 2014
The Advent of Islam

- Prophet Muhammad (570-632)

- The Caliphs (Rashidun) (632-661) (The Rightly Guided)
  - Abu Bakr (632-634)
  - Umar Ibn Khattab (634-644)
  - Uthman Ibn Affan (644-656)
  - Ali Ibn Abu Taleb (656-661)
The Fitnah or the Discord

- Ali Ibn Abu Taleb, cousin and son in law of Prophet Muhammad clashes with Aisha, wife of the Prophet for not punishing Uthman’s murderers.
- Muawiyah, Governor of Syria and relative of Uthman, opposed Ali. He was supported by wealthy Meccans.
- Those who were against Muawiyah and believed that Ali was betrayed became to be known as Shia, the Partisans of Ali.
Islamic Caliphates

- The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750)
- The Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in Islamic Spain (756-929-1031)
- The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258)
  - The Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171)
- The Ayyubid dynasty (1171-1260)
- The Mamluk Caliphate (1250-1517)
- The Ottoman Caliphate (1299-1923)
Second Reading

“Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate” by Leila Ahmed, Yale University Press, 1992
Leila Ahmed

Leila Ahmed, born 1940, is an Egyptian American writer on Islam and Islamic feminism as well as being the first women's studies professor at Harvard Divinity School. Ahmed was the recipient of the 2013 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for her analysis of the 'veiling' of Muslim women in the United States.
Map of the Middle East
Questions

- How were women’s rights around the world before Islam?
- How were women’s rights in Arabia before Islam?
- What did Islam bring to women in the 7th century?
Main Points

- Study Mesopotamia, Greece, Egypt, Iran

- Judaism and Christianity and Zoroastrianism were the prevailing religions in the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires: the two major powers at the rise of Islam.
Main points

- Some anthropologists think that the subordination of women in the Ancient Middle East appears to have become institutionalized with the rise of urban societies and with the rise of the archaic state.
- Mesopotamia: first cities.
- Class-based societies
- Codification of laws
- Paternity of property-heirs
Main Points

- Control women’s sexuality (more children, more free labours, more land, better status)
- “Respectable” women vs. “disreputable women”
- The harem of Assyrian king (12 century BCE) consisted of 40 women. Just before the Muslim conquest Khusrau 531-79 CE consisted of some 12,000 women.
Main Points

- Veil was a sign of respectability. Married women should wear it.

- Slaves and prostitutes can’t wear it.

- Upper class women had property rights, managed their affairs. They had privileges.

- Their privileges came from their male connection (father, husband, sons...).
Main points

- Mesopotamian, Persian, Hellenic and Christian cultures shared the same traditions and attitudes toward women: veil, seclusion
- Diminished role: sexual and reproductive being
Sasanian Empire

- Prevailed in Iraq-Iran region
- Large harems
- Zoroastrianism: patriarchal family, total obedience of the wife to her husband
Rare gold Dinar of Khusrau II
Byzantine Empire

- Religion: Christianity
- Prevailed in Syria and Turkey
- Main aspect: chastity of women, virginity
- Many Christian women died in martyrs for not willing to renounce to their vows of chastity
- Important to note that the celibacy notion constituted a big threat to male authority and to the socio-religious order of the time and of the region
Gold Solidus of Heraclius and son
Mediterranean Region

- Boy birth is greeted with cries of joy but not for the girl
- Early marriages for girls
- Women seclusion
- Veil is the sign of respectability: honest vs. prostitute
- Using the eunuchs to enforce the separation and guard the women space
Ancient Greek

- The qualities admired in girls were silence and submissiveness.
- Socrates, attributed the fall of Sparta to granting freedom to women, a freedom that pushed women to prostitution.
- Aristotle: “the purpose of marriage and the function of women was to provide heirs.”
Ancient Egypt

- Same rights as men to terminate marriages
- No polygamy for men...
- Woman had the right to own property and to inheritance
- She maintained the family during her husband's absence
- But, she depended on man who was the master
- Women were offered as sacrifice to the Nile River and to the gods
Ancient Egyptian Marriage

- The purpose of marriage among Egyptians was the shared life and the pleasures and comforts it offers.
- The more Greek and Roman laws spread, the less rights for Egyptian women.
Judaism, Christianity and Patriarchy

- Patriarchal ideas and regulations regarding women in Judaism were influenced by Mesopotamian laws.
- Polygamy, concubinage, unrestricted divorce for men were allowed in Judaism.
- Some aspects were later accepted by Christianism but not polygamy for instance.
Other civilizations in brief

- In India females were excluded from inheritance. A female is always dependent of a man.

- Old Chinese say: “Women is like a ball, the harder you kick it the higher it goes.”
Arabia Before the rise of Islam

- Women had no rights to inheritance
- Different types of marriages: patrilineal (male line), matrilineal (mother line), matrilocal, polyandrous, and polygamous
- Infanticide reserved mainly for girls. A woman was considered a shame and disgrace
- Some women were priestesses. They enjoyed high social status
What Did Islam Bring to Women in the 7th century?

- There is no original sin attributed to woman in Islam
- The message of the Quran is universal: to men and women
- A Woman is equal to a man in reward and punishment
Verse about equal reward

"If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter Heaven and not the least injustice will be done to them." The Quran 4:124.
Verse about equality

"O mankind! Fear your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single soul, created, out of it, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; Fear Allah, through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and be heedful of the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you." The Quran 4:1
Verse intended for Men and Women

"For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's remembrance, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." The Quran 33: 35.
Quranic text about Adam and Eve

- "And we said: 'O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden; and eat of the bountiful things therein as (when and where) you will, but approach not this tree, or you run into harm and transgression.'" The Quran 2:35

- "Then we said: "O Adam! Verily, this is an enemy to thee and thy wife: so let him not get you both out of the garden, so that thou art landed in misery." The Quran 20:117
Islam gave women rights

- Right to inheritance
- Right to divorce
- Right to financial independence
- Polygamy was limited to four wives with the strong condition to limit to ONE wife
The Issue of Inheritance

- Inheritance for woman is half of a man
- But:
- Women in Islam do not to spend on their family. They keep their wealth for themselves
The Issue of stoning

- The Quran speaks about lashes to the adulterer and the adulteress. Nothing about stoning (Biblical reference)
- “The adulteress and the adulterer, each receives a hundred lashes” The Quran 24:2
- Today in Iran and Pakistan only women are stoned, and not men
The Issue of “Qiwamah”

- Qiwamah is being in charge of (protector and maintainer)
- “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in [the husband’s] absence what God would have them guard” The Quran 4:34
Shared obligations

- Men are responsible for protecting women from harm and providing food and shelter for them.
- Women should remain faithful to their husbands.
- If ONE of the TWO fails to fulfill the obligations then punishments ensue for BOTH.
The Issue of Polygamy

- All the Muslim scholars agree that the verse about polygamy was received after the battle of ‘Uhud’ where a large number of Muslim men were killed.

- The patriarchal interpretation of the verse embraced the possibility to take FOUR wives and didn’t insist on the conditions of equality and justice.
Your thoughts...