

Egyptian Memories

openDemocracy's public meeting on 7 March 2002 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London addressed the theme of 'Women, Islam and Modernity'. The novelist Ahdaf Soueif said it is poverty, not Islam, that breeds the extremes.

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I was talking to a friend earlier today, a practising Muslim friend, and I said what I was doing tonight. She said 'You're wasting your time. Everyone will just sit around and talk in a liberal fashion about Islam nowadays. You can talk and talk, everyone will be smiling and polite. But you just try saying "Excuse me I have to say my sunset prayers now" and see how everyone will freeze.'

But I think that what we've been listening to tonight has really all been coming from the same side of the fence. In other words it doesn't sound to me as if we have any basic disagreements here about values or about what we want from life, or in fact about our fear – or at least our unease – about what we are going into; what the modern world is shaping itself into, and dragging us along with it.

This is not always the way this kind of conversation is conducted. I happened to switch on Radio 4 the other day. I didn't catch the beginning of the programme, but it was a discussion of slavery with poor Dr Zaki Badawi who is now constantly embattled on behalf of Islam. What seemed to be happening was an attempt to weigh up whether the slavery practiced in the Arab and the Muslim world was better or worse than that practiced in the West, particularly in the US, shipping slaves across the Atlantic.

It was an absurd discussion, but the thing that stuck in my mind was that one form of slavery was called 'Atlantic' and the other 'Islamic' slavery. You hear about Islamic terrorism, Islamic repression, and this was Islamic slavery.

One finds oneself constantly in a situation now of defending Islam – particularly of course after 11 September – but it was happening before too. You point out the good things about Islam, point out that Islam and modernity are not necessarily opposed.

My observations today – as a writer of fiction – will be more on the anecdotal side. Growing up as I did in Cairo in a Muslim family, the question of whether Islam was compatible with modernity was never put. It was, in fact, a question that had been settled long ago. In the late 50s and the 60s it was taken

completely for granted that you as an individual and society as a whole found a way towards modernity within its Muslim traditions.

Egypt has a huge Christian minority, a 12% Christian minority, in a country of 67 million is a lot of people. And it has always influenced how society is shaped. If I had to be home by 7:30, that was not because I was Muslim but because I was a girl growing up in Cairo at the time, and the same was true for my Christian friends.

It was taken for granted that there were things that needed reform and progress to be made but it wasn't a question of throwing out your entire religion, culture and everything that made you who you are, in order to achieve progress or modernity.

At the time that my mother was growing up – during the '30s and '40s – people did not see a conflict between embracing certain Western values or practices such as democratic elections, and remaining true to what they were. They believed it was possible to get rid of colonialism, as an unacceptable aspect of the Western world, but retained education, modern technology, modern political freedoms and so on.

So this whole debate about whether Islam means this or that, whether it holds women back, what you can or cannot do within it, this really is all very much a product of the late '70s onwards, when extremist Islam started appearing in the Arab world, certainly in Egypt. I believe, as do most people in the region, that this was primarily a response to economical and political factors. The economy was getting much worse, and people who are disenfranchised, people with no hope, will turn to extreme and dogmatic forms of thought.

Very often the battleground on which ideologies fight is women's bodies: how much should be covered up, how much can be revealed, whether they can work, and so on. I think that it would be probably very helpful and enriching to allow ideas that come from Islam and Islamic thought into the general stable of ideas from which new ways of being are created.

To give a couple of examples: the idea of women and the vote. We all know the enormous price that women in the West had to pay in order to gain the right to vote. It's worth noting that women in the Muslim world very seldom had to pay such a heavy price.

In Egypt, for example, after the revolution of '52 that spelt the end of colonialism, women acquired the right to vote in '56, and nobody had to chain themselves to railings or be force fed or dragged through the streets. It came as a natural progression of the egalitarian ideas of the revolution. Similarly we have never had to fight for equal pay for equal work. The idea of not getting equal pay for equal work would be thought of as ridiculous.

Another example: the value of keeping a family together is a pretty traditional one. The family is of paramount importance, and keeping it together is important not only for its own members but for society as a whole. Take this value and look at the labour laws in Egypt, now in danger of being eroded by the effects of globalisation and the power of companies as opposed to that of the state.

The labour laws in Egypt deal with the possibility that one partner has to go away from the family home for a period of six months or more: on official duty, or if you're sent abroad to study, or as a member of a delegation, in the diplomatic service, or to teach – because millions of Egyptians for decades taught in the rest of the Arab world.

If you were sent abroad your partner, whether you were a woman or a man, automatically had the right to accompany you with your children. Your partner would be given paid leave from work and their job would be held open for as long as you were abroad. The state would pay in fact for the tickets and some of the upkeep of the children.

This is to my mind an extremely beneficial law, and certainly people like my parents benefited from it greatly, because when my mother came to England to study my father and I were able to accompany her. The family was not split up.

Other speakers today have touched on the importance of the role of the mother and the homemaker; a role which, even though there is a lot of lip service paid to it, is not recognised and is in fact somewhat looked down upon. In the spirit of the story that Rosie (Boycott) was telling, I must say that a few months after I had my first child I was at a dinner, a publishing event, and I was sitting next to someone very big in television. He turned to me and asked what I did. And instead of saying that I write novels or whatever, I said what was uppermost in my mind: I said 'I have a very small baby'. He said 'Ah' and turned away. That was it for the rest of the evening, and it was pretty uncomfortable too because it was a sit down dinner, and I had to sit and look vaguely intelligent throughout with nobody to talk to.

I do wonder how the work of the home-maker can be officially recognised. How can it be a truly possible choice for women – or for men for that matter – to stay home and look after their children, until such a time as they are able to put them in school? We all know that you can choose to do this, but then you become economically dependent on your partner, and then of course the power balance shifts within the marriage.

There should be a way in which the person who does stay at home and keep the family together, who does the cooking and brings up the children, does not become financially dependent, is paid, perhaps, something like a teacher's salary. Who by? How would it work and so on I do not know, but I do believe that

until that happens we cannot say that most people have a real option in this regard.

And there is, interestingly, in Islam, a precept, the germ of an idea that can lead to this. I am not a scholar, but it has occurred to me that a Muslim marriage is there for the peace of both partners that they might “dwell in tranquillity” with each other*. It is not there for the woman to wash the man’s shirts. There is an idea there that the woman’s role is to be her husband’s companion and confidante and playmate, his partner. If she does anything in the house she should be paid for it.

Given what society was at the time the Quran was revealed, it falls to the man to pay for this. But if the principle is accepted that the woman should be financially recompensed for any work that she does in the house, that is quite an interesting avenue into the idea of recognising the homemaker in the only way that society nowadays recognises people – through financial reward.

I will stop here as the best part of the evening is when the audience comes into the discussion.

“And among His signs is this: that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has placed love and mercy between you. Verily in that there are signs for those who would reflect.”

Chapter of al-Rum (30), verses 20 & 21