

Amidst a World in Conflict: The Women of Islam and Us

Mari Oka

JUST WHAT SORT OF WORLD IS THE WORLD OF ISLAM?

Arab/Middle Eastern/Islamic Society

MY specialty is the study of modern Arab literature. As Afghanistan is bombed from the air, I imagine many of you will have come here to find out more about the day to day lives of women in the Islamic world. My special area of study however, is less concerned with the everyday reality of women's lives, and more of a theoretical nature.

To us, the world of Islam is one of a culture different to our own, another world entirely. My special focus is on what it means to think about issues such as the culture of this other world, or women in this world, and the sort of problems that accompany our attempts to do so.

Those of you expecting to hear about the everyday lives of Muslim women may therefore find my talk a little unsatisfying. However, the question I wish to concentrate on is this: even if we know what life is like for women in Afghanistan, or anywhere else in the Islamic world, purely at an information level, what are we to make of it? Furthermore, if we study the lives of women in the Islamic world without any consideration for the problems—historical, social and cultural—that accompany any contemplation of phenomena in other cultures, this in itself can be a source of major problems. This is my particular area of study, so today I imagine my discussion will focus on this topic.

I suspect also that most people in Japan know very little about Islam. May I mention first of all that we cannot speak of the "Islamic world" as a single entity, in which conditions for all women are identical. For example, if we are talking about French women, or American women, I think we can safely proceed straight to the main topic of discussion without talking about the kind of place France is, or the United States. This does not apply when the topic is Islam. In terms of exactly what constitutes the Islamic world, while we often use expressions such as "Arab" and "the Middle East," do we really understand the world of

which we speak, or its history? Or, what kind of religion Islam actually is? We need to examine these issues, or our discussion will not progress very far.

As of yesterday the Islamic world entered the month of Ramadan. This was broadcast on the television news, and various papers this morning also reported that “Ramadan starts today.”

Watching a news program yesterday, I heard that the commentator, or maybe it was the newscaster, had experienced Ramadan twice in Egypt. This person said that the start of Ramadan signals the beginning of a month of joyous festivities, and that while during the day fasting must be strictly observed, to the extent that even swallowing your own saliva is forbidden, as the sun goes down, people come out into the streets and a carnival atmosphere takes hold.

I too have experienced Ramadan. We often talk about people who find it raining wherever they go. Well, in my case it seems to be Ramadan wherever I go. Allow me to explain. The Islamic calendar is the lunar calendar. This calendar is fixed according to the waxing and waning of the moon, so it does not coincide with the solar calendar. This has been covered in the media as well quite a lot recently, so I think many of you will know that a year in the Islamic calendar is generally 11 or 12 days shorter than ours.

This means that in the Islamic calendar, the new year comes round sooner every year by our calendar. I traveled to Egypt to study in July 1982, right in the middle of Ramadan. On that occasion I spent 15 months in Egypt, and experienced Ramadan twice before returning to Japan. Six years later in 1988, I traveled to Morocco in April to take up an appointment there, and sure enough, Ramadan was in full swing. I stayed three years, and managed to experience four Ramadans. So it seems wherever I go, there’s a good chance it will be Ramadan. Some of you may be starting to feel sorry for me at this point, however as I mentioned earlier, Ramadan is actually a festival. Having got through the day without food or drink, at nighttime people emerge in a great release of energy: shops are open for business until late at night, the streets are transformed into pedestrian zones, complete with rows and rows of cafe tables on the median strips for outdoor food stalls, and stages are set up on every street corner for live music performances. Ramadan is also a month for the promotion of culture, so a variety of cultural events are held.

Here in Japan, New Year’s Eve is special date for us, is it not? Even children who would normally have to go home once the sun goes down go to shrines in the middle of the night for the first visit of the year. It is what we call a *hare* or gala occasion, as opposed to the everyday, or *ke*.

In one sense, Ramadan means 30 continuous days of this state of celebration. When Ramadan, in other words the month of fasting, is over, some countries then celebrate the “end of Ramadan” for three to five days.

It really is such an enjoyable 30 days of rowdy festivities, you’d think people would be too tired of celebrating to mark its end. Listening to this newscaster however, I did think he was not quite correct on one aspect of Ramadan. It was the part about people “coming out into the streets as the sun goes down.” When the sun goes down, everyone eats, so the streets take on an eerie calm as if everyone had suddenly died. Not a soul is out. Everyone is at home, tucking enthusiastically into his or her meal. This also differs depending on the country: in Egypt they lay out a great spread on the table, which everyone shares, while in Morocco, where I lived for three years, people first have some vegetable soup to gently spur their stomach, which has not been working all day, into action, followed by sweet soft drinks or high-calorie foods such as dried fruits to boost sugar levels in the body. They then go out into the streets in groups of twos or threes. Returning in the middle of the night when they feel hungry, they dine properly for the first time. It’s a very healthy way of eating. So it’s not quite correct to say that everyone tucks straight in to a meal as soon the sun goes down—there are some major differences between countries.

Another thing I believe the newscaster got wrong was the idea that Ramadan is so strict that people are not allowed to eat or drink anything at all during the day, even swallow their own saliva, or to smoke. Certainly these things are proscribed. However people who are ill or injured and pregnant women are exempt from the ban on eating. So does this mean those in normal health have to observe these severe restrictions? In actual fact they do not at all, and may eat if they feel hungry. If you really cannot wait, you simply apologize to Allah for eating that day, then make up for any days you were unable to fast that Ramadan, by fasting before the next Ramadan. It’s all very sensible, don’t you think?

To give another example of how sensible Islam is, it is well known that Muslims pray five times a day. Here in Japan we are shown images of large crowds of people proceeding to the mosque at prayer time in orderly fashion to pray. Seeing this, we are likely to come away with the impression these people are fanatical and totalitarian. However even in Japan I think you will find people this pious, and a lot of people who are not. The same goes for Islam.

At prayer times, do surgeons down tools for prayers in the middle of operations, leaving patients with their insides exposed? Of course not.

Nor do taxi drivers rush off to pray, leaving passengers to fend for themselves. There are prayers five times a day, however daytime prayers simply need to be completed by the afternoon prayers at around three o'clock. Afternoon prayers can be completed anytime up to sunset prayers. Most people intending to pray do so when the prayer times come around, however if they are by chance unable to for some reason, they will complete their prayers later. In other words, there is a lot of flexibility with regard to the timing of prayers.

So what if you cannot say your prayers by the next prayer time? You say both sets of prayers together. You may wonder how exactly people can combine two sets of prayers, however as anyone who has seen Muslims praying will know, in Islam prayer involves getting up and down, that is, standing and sitting in turn. Meaning bending and stretching, kneeling and placing one's forehead on the floor, sitting, then standing up again.

To people from cultures in which prayer fundamentally means sitting still with one's hands together, moving the body this much may seem a rather odd way of praying. Islam holds however that not only the soul, but also the body is of great importance. In Christianity for example, the physical self is viewed as somehow inferior. Complete suppression of our desires as human beings, that is physical desires such as our appetites for sex and food, and the desire for sleep, purifies the soul. This is deemed to bring the believer closer to God. Islam however does not take this view.

The image of Islam as a religion of strict asceticism is a pervasive one. In actual fact however, Islam is quite accepting when it comes to human desires, the logic being that Allah made human beings that way. Catholicism still only acknowledges sex for the purpose of procreation, therefore contraception is proscribed. This is not the case however in Islam, where if a couple is in a legal marriage relationship, both the man and the woman have the right to pursue sexual pleasure.

When it comes to female sexuality and matters related to sex, Islam gives the impression of being a very strict religion, because in the public domain certain people are required to observe certain rules very strictly, for example not showing their skin—although this actually applies to men as well as women. In fact however, Islam is not as strict as it may seem. As I mentioned earlier, Islam takes an affirmative view of human desires. We use the term "clergy," however in Islam there are no clergy living a life divorced from the secular world. Even the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran was a married man. The taking of wives is not taboo in Islam.

Returning to Ramadan for a moment, when I was studying in Egypt, I traveled extensively in the regions around the Mediterranean. Ramadan began as I crossed from Turkey into Syria. Thinking I would be unable to eat if the restaurants were closed the next day, I asked someone at the hotel if the restaurants would be open, as Ramadan had started the previous day. I was told “not to worry.” That’s all very well, I thought, but I’d be in trouble if I really couldn’t get a meal. But I was told no, no, not to worry. Later I realized why the person I asked had been so unconcerned. The restaurants were open as usual. Syria is part of the Islamic sphere, with a large Muslim population. It is also however a socialist state, and the restaurants stay open during the daytime even at Ramadan. Naturally there are people who fast. However even many Muslims will quite happily eat. No one worries about it at all. In Syria therefore, I had no problems whatsoever.

Next, I traveled by bus about five hours from the Syrian capital of Damascus to Amman in Jordan. Jordan is a monarchy. Feeling thirsty, I went to buy some soft drink at a drink stand, but the youth behind the stand told me he was unable to sell me any because it was Ramadan. “I’m not a Muslim, so can you sell me some?” I replied, but was told that he would be punished if he did so. I must say I did wonder why he was open during the day. In Jordan, a mere five hours by bus from Damascus, no restaurants were open. This is because eating is punishable under the law.

My point here is, while we may speak of an Islamic world, or places in the same Arab world, even in countries next to each other there will be people who fast during Ramadan, and people who don’t. Meaning that different societies have different attitudes to fasting. Therefore the more familiar one becomes with the Islamic world, the less one uses expressions like “In Islam...” “They might all be Muslim, but different people do different things...” is in reality sometimes really the only answer I can offer.

Moving along, up to now we have been using the term “Islamic world” without actually defining what this means. We often use the terms Arab, Middle East and Islamic world. What part of the world then is Arab? Where is the Middle East? I’m sure you have all heard the phrase “Middle East” often enough, and use it yourself. But if someone were to ask you, “where is the Middle East?” would you be able to answer? Wouldn’t your answer perhaps be something along the lines of, “somewhere over that way?” Somehow we know that China is not in the Middle East. I suspect however your image of the Middle East is of the world “over that way” west of China.

In specific terms, first of all the Middle East refers to the world west of Afghanistan, the country currently dominating the headlines. From Afghanistan it then continues, encompassing the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and Sudan. North Africa has Arabic as its language, and a majority of Muslims in its population, so is now also counted as part of the "Middle East." Furthermore, while we tend to think of the Andalusia region and Spain as it is today as historically part of Europe, for 800 years from the eighth to the 15th century, they were part of the Arab and Islamic worlds. The Andalusian cities of Granada, Seville and Cordoba provided the setting for the golden age of Arab and Islamic culture. Thus in historical terms, Spain can be included in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and the Middle East. The Islamic republics of central Asia such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are now also considered part of the Middle East, following their transition to independent republic status on the collapse of the Soviet Union. The area west of Libya in North Africa is also now part of the Middle East.

Historically people in these countries spoke Persian, Turkish or Arabic, and their religion was Islam. Think of the Middle East therefore not as a strictly defined geographical concept, but as a cultural sphere. Linguistically, Afghanistan and Iran are part of the Persian cultural sphere, while the language of Turkey is Turkish. The remaining countries excluding these three constitute the Arab world, having Arabic as their official or first language.

What Sort of People are the Arabs?

Most of the Middle East therefore belongs to the Arab world. Being next to each other and both Islamic states, people often fail to distinguish much between Iran and Iraq, however Iranians speak Persian, and Iraqis Arabic, and they belong to different ethnic groups. Persian incidentally is an Indo-European language, a distant relative of languages such as English and French. Persian is written in Persian script, which has its origins in Arabic script, so is often assumed to be somewhat similar to Arabic, however in terms of grammar it belongs to the same family as English and French.

Of the Middle East, my particular specialty lies in the Arab world. So who exactly are the Arabs? Arabs are people with Arabic as their language, who identify with the culture that developed historically in Arabic as their own culture. The identity of Arabs is defined by Arabic as a language and the linguistic culture of Arabic. In other words, it has nothing to do with religion. When we think of Jews or Christians, we tend to think of Europeans, however there are also many Jews and

Christians in this Arab world of the Middle East.

Think about it for a moment and it's obvious—because both Judaism and Christianity emerged from Palestine, the center of the Arab world. It took 300 years for the Roman Empire to make Christianity its state religion, and 1,000 years for Christianity to penetrate Europe, and the regions north of the Continent to be Christianized. Both Christianity and Judaism had been already widespread in the Middle East by this time.

Therefore while some say that ethnic conflict is the “destiny” of Jews and Arabs, within the Islamic world itself, this is arrant nonsense. Why? Because as I mentioned earlier, Arabs are people who speak Arabic, and their identity has no connection with religion.

The Arab world also contains many followers of the Jewish faith, as well as Christians. Following September 11, President Bush made comments like “this is war” and spoke of a “crusade.” From the perspective of Christians in Europe, I think the Crusades are viewed as a war between “the Euro-Christian world” and “Arab-Islamic world,” in short a religious war between Christianity and Islam. Here in Japan our understanding of world history has until now been aligned with that of Euro-Christian society. However, in the Arab-Islamic world, there are Muslims (followers of Islam), and Christians, and followers of the Jewish faith. All Arabs. This being the case, how can the Crusades have been a conflict between “Christianity” and “Islam”? All Arabs in Jerusalem and the Arab world suffered invasion by Europeans, not only the Muslims, but the Christians and Jews as well.

A book has come out with the title *Arabu ga mita juujigun* (“The Crusades through Arab Eyes”). Until now, we have only approached events like the Crusades from a Euro-Christian historical perspective. Take the other view however, that of Islam, and what do you find? It is not only Muslims who were attacked by the Crusaders. Christians and Jews were also subject to invasion, as Arabs. Is this really religious warfare? From the Islamic viewpoint, these were clearly wars of European incursion on the Arab world.

What Sort of Religion is Islam?

What sort of religion then is Islam? We have unconsciously adopted the Euro-Christian view of Islam, which influences our ideas concerning Islam. There is a tendency to view Islam as a totally different religion to Christianity, an Arab faith in which people believe in some god called Allah. This is where the ideas of a “clash of civilizations” and “clash of religions” have their origins. In actual fact however, Islam is on a con-

tinuum with Judaism and Christianity, sharing the same lineage. Most people realize that Christianity grew out of Judaism, however in the same way, Islam as a religion has similar origins to these other two faiths.

The Jewish holy book is sacred in Christianity as well, in the form of the Old Testament of the Bible. The same actually applies to Islam. Let me explain what I mean by “the same.” The Jewish faith emerged teaching of one god, the Creator, who made everything in the world. This faith continues today, as Judaism. 2,000 years ago, Jesus appeared, and those believing him to be the Messiah became Christians. The teachings of Jesus took Judaism, the religion of a single people, and transformed it into a world religion, a universal faith. Islam however holds that while Christians were certainly right to open up the universal lessons of Judaism for the benefit of all mankind, lessons which until then had been limited to the Jews as an ethnic group, in doing so they made the mistake of elevating Jesus to divine status, because although a prophet, he was still only a human being.

Thus, in the seventh century, Muhammad made the teachings of God correct once again, as opposed to the Christians, who believed Christ to be divine. This is Islam. Islam also holds that Muhammad was the last of the prophets. In Islam God is known as “Allah.” This “Allah” is not the god of Islam. Allah is Arabic for one god, that is the one god who created the world.

I mentioned earlier that there are Christian Arabs. In Japan, Japanese Christians read the Bible in Japanese. The word used for this one deity is “*kami*.” American Christians read the Bible in English, which writes of “God.” Christians in France read the Bible in French, which refers to “Dieu.”

Does this mean there are many gods? A god called Dieu, and another known as God? No it does not. Dieu and God are one and the same. If you read a Bible written in Arabic in the Arab world, it will refer to Allah. The same god. It is a major error therefore to call Allah the god of Islam. The god of Islam and the Judeo-Christian god may seem to be different, but they are not. This one god is known in Arabic as Allah. From the Islamic perspective, Jews and Christians believe in the same god they do. In this sense, while the religions may be different *per se*, people worship the same god. And this same god known as Allah reveals himself to human beings through writings in the same manner; in the Torah for Jews, and in the Gospels for Christians. For Muslims it is the Koran.

The Islamic World

These teachings in written form are, in other words, the scriptures. From the Muslim perspective, Jews and Christians are also “people of the scriptures.” In terms of understanding the Islam world, there is a vast difference between those with no knowledge of Islam, looking at Islam through the Euro-Christian filter that has developed over the ages, and those who have experienced Islam from the inside, that is Muslims and cultural outsiders such as myself who have lived in Islamic countries. For example, if we speak of the “Euro-Christian world,” this is the world of Christianity, populated only by Christians, and with Christian culture and Christian churches. Historically, the Jews as non-believers had always been excluded from this world, being as they are outside of Christianity. Anti-Semitism has always been a feature of Euro-Christian society.

Then modern times saw the emergence of the truly fearsome concept of “race” in the guise of science. Talk of “race” has absolutely no scientific basis at all. It was Nazi Germany that combined historical anti-Semitism with modern racialism in the worst possible form. It is said that 5 or 6 million people in Europe deemed to be Jewish were sent to extermination camps such as Auschwitz, in a plan to annihilate an entire people.

However, when we talk about the Islamic world, it is a mistake to draw from the analogy of the Euro-Christian world that this is a cultural world consisting solely of Islam and followers of Islam. Why? Because Islamic society is built on the principle of coexistence, not only among Muslims, but including Christians and followers of the Jewish faith, coexisting in symbiosis as members of that society.

Islamic culture incorporates the culture of Christianity as found in the Islamic world. Jewish culture is there as well. Go and visit an Islamic society. You will find Christian churches, and Jewish synagogues. People of different faiths and ethnic groups living side by side: this was the way society worked. This was a fundamental principle of society. This historically was a distinguishing feature of the Islamic world.

We tend to think of Islam as a very strict religion somewhat lacking in tolerance, however remember how the Spain reconquered by Christianity was devastated by the Spanish Inquisition. Converts to Christianity were subjected to inquisition to determine if they were really Christians, tortured and killed. It is not Islamic society that historically has refused to permit coexistence with other faiths, but Euro-Christian society, as demonstrated by its anti-Semitism throughout history. These people pro-

jected the most negative aspects of their own society onto Islam, coloring their understanding of Islam. If there is anything that may be called Islamic civilization, this civilization is characterized by a system that was originally accepting of different values, a system of coexistence and symbiosis between different peoples of various ethnic groups.

However, this is the system, and nothing more. Note I said that society “had this fundamental principle.” To claim that minority Jews and Christians were never persecuted in the Islamic world would be misleading. In reality there has been much discord, friction, conflict and oppression.

The same naturally applies to relations among followers of Islam themselves. The important thing is what the society possessed as its fundamental principle. In other words, even if persecution and conflict are historical fact, they are from the perspective of Islam a deviation from this fundamental principle, and in contravention of the teachings of Islamic law. The question begs therefore of whether coexistence with followers of the Jewish faith was historically a fundamental principle of Euro-Christian society as well. Allow me to give an example. Morocco was historically home to the largest Jewish population in the Mediterranean world. As you know from the film *Casablanca*, because Morocco was a French colony, when the mother country was occupied by Nazi Germany, Morocco also fell automatically under Nazi rule.

The Sultan of Morocco at that time was then ordered by the Vichy government in France, puppet regime of the Nazis, to round up all the Jews in Morocco. So how did the Sultan, later Muhammad V, respond? Informing the Vichy government that “They may be Jews but they are also my subjects. As Sultan it is my duty to protect my Jewish subjects,” he resolutely refused to comply with their demand. During the years of Nazi occupation, how many Jews in France were rounded up, betrayed, arrested and sent to the camps, never to return? When you consider this, perhaps actions like that of the Sultan of Morocco help shed new light on the workings of the Islamic world.

Returning for a moment to my earlier discussion, if I may, the word “Islam” means “absolute surrender to Allah,” Allah being the Arabic word for the One God. As I mentioned earlier, because Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the same lineage, the teachings found in the Old and New Testament of the Bible are also part of Islamic lore.

For example, in Islam, figures from Adam of Adam and Eve, to Noah of Noah’s Ark, Moses and Abraham, and including Jesus, are accorded the status of prophets, like Muhammad. Take Abraham, in Arabic known as Ibrahim, who was ready to sacrifice his own son if God had

ordered him to do so. Yes, make a sacrificial offering of his precious only son if that is what God wanted. To Muslims this represents the epitome of Islam, absolute surrender to Allah.

In Islam, Abraham is known as “the first Muslim.” Islam first appeared as a religion in the seventh century, however the first Muslim was this Abraham of Judaism, the Abraham of the Old Testament, as Ibrahim. This is why you find so many people in the Arab and Islamic worlds with the name Ibrahim. There is also Youssef, equivalent to Joseph. And you will find many Arab Muslims with other names familiar from the Old and New Testaments, such as Daoud for David, and Yacob (Jacob), Moussa for Moses, Issa for Jesus.

To Whom Does Jerusalem Really Belong?

A fundamental principle of the Islamic world was that Christians and followers of Judaism could coexist alongside followers of Islam. However a conflict has now arisen in the form of the Palestinian question and the problem of Jerusalem, over who owns Palestine—Jews or Arabs, and to whom exactly Jerusalem belongs—Jews or Muslims, and the restoration of each to their rightful owners.

There is a tendency at times to discuss these issues in terms of 2,000 or 3,000 year battle between Jews and Arabs, a religious and ethnic clash of Judaism and Islam dating right back to the Old Testament. This however is a great fallacy. As I mentioned earlier, this cannot possibly be a conflict stretching back thousands of years—because until modern times both Jerusalem and Palestine were part of the Islamic world. And being part of the Islamic world did not mean these places were under the exclusive control of Muslims.

Being part of the Islamic world meant that followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam lived side by side, with Jerusalem their home city, and Palestine their homeland. This was the reality of life in the Islamic world. To describe this state of affairs I use the perhaps slightly unusual term of “part-ownership.” The city of Jerusalem for example, historically belonged in part for a very long time to followers of the three faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as a sacred place to all of them. In other words they shared it.

What happened however, was that the concept of the modern nation state, in which one piece of land, or one country, becomes the property of one people to the exclusion of others, made its way to this part of the world. This was most definitely a European idea, brought from the West, and as result, while Jerusalem historically was home to Palestinian Arabs who were Muslims, as well as followers of Christianity and

Judaism, followers of the Jewish faith were lumped together as “Jews,” different to the Arabs, with Muslims and Christians becoming the Palestinian Arabs. The Jewish nation of Israel was then created in this Palestine.

Currently there is a three-way struggle over Jerusalem, as to whether it belongs to Jews, to Muslims, or to Christians. However, as someone who studies the Arab world, my view is that while these three groups appear to be in direct conflict with each other, in fact they are not. They are all making the same claim. What is that claim? That a single city can belong to a single religion, or one people, to the exclusion of others. In other words they all hold the same views on the concept of ownership. The three different faiths are applying the same values to insist that the city belongs to Judaism, or to Christianity, or to Islam. While appearing to be in decisive opposition to each other, all their arguments are in fact based on the same view. This is a far cry from any “clash of civilizations.”

Surely then, we should reject this way of thinking? And take the traditional, historical view of the Islamic world that Jerusalem belongs to followers of Islam, and of Judaism, and of Christianity. One city overcoming religious and ethnic differences to open its gates to all peoples, be shared by all peoples. Surely we too must insist that this is how human society ought to function, this is the system by which all civilizations should operate.

In my view, studying the Islamic world does not mean believing that “Jerusalem belongs to Islam,” but rejecting entirely this fight over whether Jerusalem belongs to Islam or Judaism, in which both sides are arguing from the same perspective, and learning about an alternative course for civilization. This confrontation has been created in modern times. We must reject the very question of whether the city belongs to Palestinians, or to Jews. Taking the side of Islam, the side of the Palestinians does not mean insisting that Jerusalem belongs to Islam, but rather I believe, viewing this world as the Jerusalem and the Palestine of coexistence and cooperation before modern times, when this coexistence and cooperation were the fundamental principles underpinning society.

WOMEN IN ISLAM

Does Islam Oppress Women?

Mention Islam and the image that often comes to mind is that of a reli-

gion extremely oppressive to women. The way in which the Taliban of Afghanistan, described as fundamentalists, make women wear the burqa, is cited as an example of the suppression of women's human rights. In contrast, those on the Islamic side claim that no, it was in fact Islam that liberated women from an extremely discriminatory state. So, which is correct?

The latest issue of the magazine *Sekai* ("The World") published by Iwanami features an article entitled "RAWA—shining a light into the dark world of Afghan women," by Keiko Kawasaki. This morning's edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* also carries a piece about RAWA by Kawasaki, in the opinion column. The human rights of women in Afghanistan have been violated in various ways since before the emergence of the Taliban, and RAWA is involved in activities, supported by this Keiko Kawasaki, that reject fundamentalism in all its forms, not just that of the Taliban.

In her article, Kawasaki writes as follows, if I may quote:

RAWA schools provide not only a basic education, but help pupils understand the situation Afghanistan faces now, and how the present difficulties came about, and teach them the modern idea that women have the same right to live as men.

Allow me to repeat that last part: "teach them the modern idea that women have the same right to live as men." Fundamentally I agree with what Kawasaki has written, however if we explore this a little more deeply, it means values holding that "women do not have the same right to live as men" are pre-modern values. And, that the Taliban, and the men of the Northern Alliance, and in fact everyone deemed to be fundamentalists, hold the view that women do not have the same right to live as men. The women of RAWA are rejecting this view, and so it becomes a case of Islamic fundamentalism equals pre-modern.

What does it actually mean to be fundamentalist? To interpret the scriptures literally, to deem the scriptures infallible. Everything in the scriptures is true, so follow them to the letter. This kind of attitude attracts the label of "fundamentalism." So according to this syllogism, if the teachings of the Koran are interpreted and acted upon literally, women will not have the same right to live as men, and therefore Islam is a pre-modern faith.

On the Arabian Peninsula, before the advent of Islam, when a child was born, custom dictated that if a girl, it would be killed, the most practical manifestation possible of the idea that women do not have the same right to live as men. Naturally there were various economic and

social reasons why girls might be killed.

The Koran explicitly forbids female infanticide. In other words, the Koran insists that women have the same right to live as men. If this is a modern way of thinking, then Islam had already reached the modern age by the seventh century. If we consider the idea of equality of the sexes to be a modern one, then we find this idea actually appeared in Islam long before Europe.

People in Islam use this as grounds to claim that the advent of Islam liberated women from the many forms of oppression they suffered at the time. The time before Islam is known as the Jahiliyya. "Jahiliyya" means "ignorance," and is translated into Japanese as "the age of darkness." In other words, from an Islamic perspective, these were ignorant and benighted Dark Ages, yet to be illuminated by the teachings of Islam.

Certainly this was a period of extremely discriminatory practices against women, as demonstrated by the killing of girl children. At the same time however, women also enjoyed a number of freedoms. For example in marriage, after the advent of Islam, males were permitted by Islam to engage in polygamy, while women were forbidden relationships with more than one man. As far as women were concerned, this meant that a woman's sexuality, her sexual relationships, were confined to one male. In the age of Jahiliyya however, in other words before Islam, with some allowance for regional variations, women had greater freedom to engage in sexual relationships with different men on their own initiative. With the appearance of Islam, this was restricted because Islam held that a woman could only legally have a sexual relationship with one man. So it is not simply a case of all or nothing, that is, of Islam either oppressing or liberating women. As we look at each individual event, some were liberating, while some restricted women greatly. There are in fact many sides to this issue.

Equality of the Sexes in the Koran

As the example of female infanticide shows us, there exist among the teachings of Islam those that proclaim the equality of men and women. For example, on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, a group of female converts to Islam came to Muhammad one day to lodge a complaint. "Why is it," they asked, "that we have converted to Islam and obey the teachings of Allah in the same way as male followers of Islam, but when Allah reveals his teachings, he only does so to male Muslims?"

Arabic has male and female genders, like French. A male follower of

Islam is called a “Muslim,” and a female follower of Islam a “Muslimah.” Once again as in French, for plurals, while female plural forms can only refer to females, male plural forms include females as well as males. Just as the word “man” in English means “male,” and also in some cases refers to “humans” in general, including females, it is the male that stands for humans as a whole. Therefore, addressing “all male Muslims” in terms of form is a call to men, however, it could also include women. In reality however, although this may be referred to as a call to both men and women, on the surface it is only actually a call to males. The Muslim women complained that this was discriminating against women.

Therefore, the next revelation from Allah was directed to “modest Muslim men, and modest Muslim women,” that is, as equally to female Muslims as male Muslims. The adjective used here is “modest,” however there are a host of other virtues demanded of Muslims. These are identical for men and women. For example, it is not that men are required to be “brave” and women “modest,” or differences of this sort. “Male Muslims” and “female Muslims” are enjoined to strive for the same virtues.

A woman called Leila Ahmed has written a book entitled *Women and Gender in Islam*. Ahmed is an historian from Egypt, and she notes that in any work deemed to be scripture, it is extremely rare for female believers to be addressed on the same level as male believers, and explicitly addressed as part of the audience for those teachings. According to Ahmed’s book, she has studied the scriptures of Judaism and the Christian scriptures, however I don’t know to what extent she has studied Buddhist scriptures. In any case, even if she has not compared the scriptures of all religions, from the perspective of Judeo-Christian tradition at least, she has found that Islam treats both sexes with perfect equality, and the virtues required of male and female followers of Islam are identical. Furthermore, both are promised the same reward for exhibiting these virtues. This too demonstrates the equality of men and women in Islam.

This voice of gender equality is thus always an undercurrent in Islam, like a steady bass line in a piece of music. The Arabic word for the practices of the Prophet is Sunna (from which the name of the Sunni sect is also derived). Pious followers of Islam take the behavior of the Prophet during his life as their model for living. With his turban, Osama bin Laden has modeled his dress exactly on that of the Prophet.

Judging by the various anecdotes we read concerning women, the Prophet Muhammad on the whole treated women well. For example, he

was extremely vexed because his wives refused to do as they were told. Umar, who later became the Second Caliph, then told the Prophet “you should just beat them,” or words to that effect, however Muhammad could not bring himself to raise a hand to his wives. When the Prophet’s wives were harassed by men in the street, Umar came to the Prophet and advised him, “It’s because they are walking around with their faces showing that they get harassed like that, because people cannot distinguish them from ordinary believers. You should at least make them wear veils, as befits the wives of the Prophet.” In response to this came the revelation, “Wives of the Prophet, you are not like other woman, so veil your bosoms.”

Followers of Islam pray facing Mecca. There is also a Sunna recorded in which the Prophet continued praying even as one of his wives snoozed facing Mecca.

Asymmetry in the Rights of Men and Women under Islamic Law

Women are said to suffer great discrimination under Islam, however if the question is whether the Koran contains passages that discriminate against women, or if the Prophet did so himself, the answer is no. Leila Ahmed suggests that this discrimination has resulted from the writing of Islamic laws in later centuries by males interpreting the Koran to suit their own ends. Certainly if you examine Islamic law, you will find the rights of women severely restricted. For example, men can have four wives, and moreover divorce easily whenever they feel like it. The Koran states however that if a man has more than one wife, he must love each wife equally. Furthermore this revelation from Allah allowing men to have up to four wives came at a time of constant warring, and a dramatic rise in the number of widows and women left alone to take care of children whose fathers had been killed. The revelation that “Allah rejoices when a man marries a widow” was a form of social security. It does not mean rich men acquiring one young wife after another to sate their own desires. However, men focused on the “up to four wives” aspect alone and interpreted it to suit themselves, paying no heed to the underlying reasons. This then becomes an issue of what kind of people with what sort of values interpreted the scriptures, and when.

What Does It Mean to Be a “Fundamentalist”?

Allow me to give another example. The Taliban are described as fundamentalists, because they make Afghan women wear the burqa, and adhere strictly to the teachings of Islam. Meanwhile, in Egypt there is an organization also branded as fundamentalist: the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the 1950s, the second leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, a man by the name of Hodeiby, expressed the view that women receiving higher education and working in professions in no way contravenes the teachings of Islam.

Both the Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood are known as fundamentalist organizations. The Taliban however, made women don the burqa and drove them out of the public arena. A woman's place, they said, was at home. In contrast, in the 1950s the Muslim Brotherhood insisted women receiving higher education and moving into the professions in no way contradicted Islamic teachings. Of course, this was under the condition that women "not neglect their duties in the home." Women were however permitted to receive higher education. The Taliban prohibit the education of women. So which is correct? If the Taliban interpretation of Islam is a fundamentalist interpretation, how can an interpretation like that of the Muslim Brotherhood be possible?

There are reasons why the Muslim Brotherhood allows women to receive higher education. The males who make up the Brotherhood are from the middle classes. For people of the middle classes, if the women of their family: their wife, a daughter or sister goes on to higher education and into a profession, this means a rise in income, and therefore of the family's social status. The social advancement of women coincides with the class interests of the main body of support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

In contrast, the Taliban are mainly refugees. Not from the urban middle classes moreover, but from farming communities and outlying regions. Therefore, they take traditions suited to their local communities, and bring them to the cities, claiming they are "Islamic custom." The social advancement of women furthermore will result in some men losing their jobs. For men of the poorest classes particularly, the emergence of women on the labor market means competing with women for work. Not surprisingly, these men have a negative view of female social advancement. If there are some men urging women too to make their mark in society, and other men saying "no, a woman's place is in the home," who do you suppose they will support?

The two groups are advocating totally opposite courses of action, both in the name of Islam. It follows then that even if someone advocates something in the name of Islam, in most instances, the deciding factor is not so much what Islam actually says, but ultimately the interpretation of Islam by certain people with certain interests at the time, and under certain social and politico-economic conditions.

Thus we cannot make any blanket statements about women in Islam.

Does the Taliban interpretation of Islam describe the position of women in Islam? Or do the views of the Muslim Brotherhood? At the very least, the philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood is better for women. Ultimately, the position of women in Islam is determined by a number of factors—political, economic, social, historical and cultural—at that particular time and in that particular society. It is not possible to discuss the way women are, or the way women ought to be, simply by claiming “the Koran says this,” because even the Koran has over the ages been interpreted in a very male-centric way, for the benefit of men.

The picture of how women ought to be in Islam is not that painted by the fundamentalists, a picture in which until now males have been the focus. In opposition to this, a movement to take an alternative “fundamentalist” view of the Koran from the female perspective is taking hold across the globe. There are moves to reinterpret the Koran that identify those teachings of the Koran that clearly advocate equality between the sexes, the idea being that these represent the true spirit of Islam in the Koran. If women were unable even to receive a higher education, and as long as the religious authorities excluded them, no move to reinterpret the Koran could have occurred. Such a move is now beginning.

The Complicity between Feminism and Colonialism through History

I think it was about 1995 that Newsweek raised the issue of the Taliban forcing Afghan women to don the burqa, and it became generally known that serious infringements of women’s human rights were occurring in Afghanistan. What I find extremely odd however, is the assumption that the human rights of Afghan women were not being trampled on before the Taliban came along. Following its civil war, Afghanistan lay in ruins. Now men like the assassinated General Masoud are seen as heroes, but what was his Northern Alliance doing in Kabul? Despoiling, abducting and raping women then killing them. With or without a burqa, it was no time for a woman to be found walking the streets.

When women in Afghanistan were suffering all this, was the world, were we concerned about their human rights? We lived our lives quite contentedly without the existence of a country in the world called Afghanistan even impinging on our consciousness. Suddenly, however, when the Taliban took control of the capital and made women don the burqa, we remembered that country called Afghanistan. We remembered there were women there, and that the women of Afghanistan also had rights. The Western media, the media in the United States and in Europe, then seized upon forcing women to wear the burqa as a form of suppressing women’s human rights. So what was all this about?

It is that when something is done in the name of Islam, we react at once, saying it cannot be permitted. However if we were truly serious about the human rights of women in Afghanistan, surely we should have been concerned and thinking about their situation before, whether or not it had come about in the name of Islam.

There is an Egyptian feminist by the name of Nawal el Saadawi, originally a doctor. Around 10 of her books have been translated into Japanese. The foreword from the English version of one of these books, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, is also included in the Japanese version, and makes highly recommended reading. In a conversation with someone on a visit to Japan, Saadawi declared that “the West is in no position to teach us about human rights.”

Saadawi also made the following comment: “They colonized our world, and now through neocolonialism they are exploiting it economically. This is clearly a violation of human rights.” In other words, the West, and America, responsible for clear violations of human rights both historically, and now, certainly are in no position to lecture others about human rights, or contend that Islam suppresses human rights, as if human rights were an exclusively Western concept. Saadawi has identified in no uncertain terms the double standard of the West. If you lot want to talk about human rights, she insists, you should think first about how you are violating ours.

You can liken it to President Bush speaking of “a challenge to freedom and democracy,” as if Western civilization is the epitome of freedom and democracy, and Islam is not, and then massacring ordinary Afghans. A contradiction in terms. Despite this, for our part, while Japan may not be part of the West, we identify with the West, and imagine that we have ideas about human rights, but that Islam does not, and suppresses those human rights. And when the rights of women are trampled upon in the name of Islam, we grow agitated and speak out in criticism. Saadawi however insists that such criticism is anti-Islamist, and certainly not grounded in the notion of universal human rights.

In 1979, revolution in Iran led to the formation of an Islamic republic there. At the time of the Islamic revolution, it was reported that under the Islamic Republic of Iran women were forced to don the chador, stripped of many of the rights they had enjoyed under the pre-revolutionary monarchy, and suffered suppression of their human rights. Saadawi also discusses this in the foreword to the English version of *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Where was the criticism from the Western media, she asks, before the revolution, that is under the Shah’s regime, when Iranians were being arrested by the secret police for political

crimes, and tortured and killed in underground dungeons? It was America that propped up a monarchy in Iran that had repeatedly violated human rights. I think you can see from this what a double standard it is on the part of the United States and the rest of the West to attack Islam on the basis that it condones the violation of human rights.

Making women don the veil is viewed as discrimination against women, while the low status of women in society has been cited as proof that Islamic culture and society have been backward throughout history. In the age of imperialism, the status of women in society was seen as evidence of a lack of development in society as a whole, justifying the colonization of the Islamic world by the countries of the West. Historically, the liberation of women was used to justify colonial rule. In other words, in the Islamic world there is a history of feminism being employed as justification for colonial rule.

THE WOMEN OF PALESTINE

Here I would like to discuss the current status of women in Palestine. If we wish to know more about the reality of life for women in the Islamic world, it is indeed important to know how the role of women is interpreted in Islam, and in the Koran. The fact is though, at the same time, there is much more to the persecution suffered by women in the Islamic world today than things like being made to wear a veil in the name of Islam. Take a look at Afghanistan. What is the main problem for women in Kabul under the Taliban regime as the city is subjected to bombing raids? Not being made to wear a burqa, but quite simply the risk of being hit by American missiles.

This bombing is justified furthermore in the name of removing the repressive Taliban forces from Afghanistan. When we look at women in the Islamic world, rather than simply looking at how the religion of Islam oppresses women, more importantly we need to look at the kind of oppression women are suffering in those places deemed part of the Islamic world. The source of these women's oppression is not necessarily their culture or religion.

If we look at the history of Palestine, we see that in 1947 the United Nations decided to create for the Jews of Europe, victims of the Nazi Holocaust, a state in Palestine. But this was a strange idea from the start. Jews in Europe became victims of the Nazis as a result of historical anti-Semitism in Europe, and modern-day racialism. Why then, we may wonder, was it necessary to give them the land of the Palestinians? The reasoning is that in the Old Testament, it is recorded that Jews lived

there in ancient times. This story however belongs in the realm of legend, a legend belonging to a group of people who follow one particular religion. This may well be their story, but why do other people have to be victimized on the basis of this story? And as a result of this, in 1948 the state of Israel was created, with some people being turned out of their homeland of Palestine as refugees, and other Christian and Muslim Arabs who stayed suddenly finding themselves part of a Jewish state, and second-class citizens in their own homeland.

Whichever way you look at the 1947 United Nations resolution on the partition of Palestine, there is definitely more land allocated to the Jews. Whether the United Nations even had the right to go ahead and partition people's land to form a Jewish state there to start with is an issue in itself. No matter how generous you wish to be, it remains unfair that the Jews, with a far smaller population, were given the greater share of territory. When Israel was created, not surprisingly the Arab nations opposed this and went to war, a war in which Israel was victorious. Israel then proceeded to occupy most of the area that had been put aside as an Arab state, in violation of the United Nations resolution of 1947. Despite this, the United Nations, and individual countries, immediately recognized this as Israeli territory. The remaining West Bank of the River Jordan and east Jerusalem came under Israeli occupation with the Six-Day War in 1967.

In August 1990, Iraq attacked Kuwait. Then, in January 1991, in order to liberate Kuwait, invaded by Iraq in violation of international law, a multinational force embarked on the Gulf War. In the five months from the invasion in August to January, the world poured in their armies to aid in the liberation of Kuwait.

The West Bank of the Jordan River however, occupied in 1967, had by 1990 languished under Israeli military occupation for almost a quarter of a century. Moreover Israel had continued to settle this region under occupation. On each occasion, the United Nations passed a resolution condemning Israel, but each resolution has been met with total indifference, and had not the slightest impact. Palestine has been left for a quarter of a century with its residents suffering persecution by the occupying forces on an everyday basis, while Israel continues to build new settlements, making east Jerusalem and the West Bank in reality Israeli territory already. Kuwait however was liberated after only five months. The end of the Gulf War brought criticism of the double standard that had allowed this state of affairs in Palestine to continue, and the Middle East peace process began, with provisional Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza commencing in 1993 following

the Oslo Accord.

In September 2000 however, the current Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, then leader of the Likud party, forced his way onto a site sacred to Islam, leaving the Oslo Accord in tatters and causing the collapse of the peace process itself. Since then, whenever Palestinians have thrown stones, or engaged in suicide bombings, the Israeli army has responded by firing missiles into areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. They seal off these areas, surround the towns with tanks and bombard them. The use of sophisticated weaponry to bomb Afghanistan in retaliation for the suicide attacks of September 11, without even knowing who was responsible, is a situation that Palestinians have faced without respite since September 2000.

From time to time throughout this history of conflict, Palestinians have been massacred at Palestinian refugee camps. During the Suez War of 1956, this occurred at a Palestinian Arab village by the name of Kafr Qasim, located inside Israel. A curfew was imposed on the village. However, this was done after the villagers had left to work in the fields, so they returned to the village at sunset, not realizing the curfew had been put in place. They were shot, one after the other, by Israeli troops waiting at the entrance to the village. Around 50 people were killed. A trial was later held, and a guilty verdict handed down to the commanders who ordered the Israeli troops to shoot. And what do you suppose was their punishment? A fine of around 100 Japanese yen, I believe. For taking the lives of 50 people. The verdict was a joke.

In 1976, the refugee camp of Tel-el-Zaater on the outskirts of Beirut was surrounded and subjected to intense bombardment by Lebanese right-wing forces over the period of half a year. The camp was said to have held 20,000 people, however after six months there were no medical supplies left, or food, and the liberating forces surrendered. By then, it is said that 4,000 people had been killed.

In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and surrounded Beirut. At Sabra and Shatila, two refugee camps in Beirut, which had been sealed off from the outside world, Lebanese right-wing militia in league with Israel massacred people at will with the complicity of the Israeli army. Over the three days from 16-18 September 2,000 or as many as 3,000 Palestinians are said to have been massacred.

To date, several thousand Palestinians have been massacred. The events in New York in which several thousand people were obliterated in a moment were indeed horrific, however, in fact so are events in Afghanistan and Palestine. Such is the usual state of affairs in the world as a whole. Incidents that to us appear out of the ordinary or exception-

al, have been part of everyday life for Palestinians now for 50 years.

The events of September 11 therefore taught us that living safely in itself is actually the exception in the world today, and demonstrated to us, if somewhat belatedly, that we too are part of the real world that people in Afghanistan and Palestine live with every day.

CONCLUSION

Recent events have raised awareness of the need to broaden our knowledge of Islam. Certainly we know little of Islam. But how much do we really know about American society, Christianity or European civilization? Not that much, I believe. We may say we know nothing of Islam, as if we knew all there is to know about Western civilization or Christianity, but again, do we really?

There is no denying our lack of knowledge when it comes to Islam. So why do we need to know about it? Because if we don't know about the situation in Palestine, we will become targets for terrorists? I suspect that our current high level of interest in Islam is because we fear for our lives. I sense a certain unease, a feeling that if we do nothing, if we don't find out more about these people, who knows when we may be next on the list?

However, as long as this remains our reasoning, I believe terrorists will always be with us. In other words, whether our lives are threatened or not, the injustices I have spoken of here have continued in places like Afghanistan and Palestine. These injustices should surely be eliminated regardless of whether our own lives are in danger. However until the world, until America, and until we in Japan had a gun placed at our heads and our own lives endangered, we were not even properly aware that this country called Afghanistan existed. We did not look to see what was happening to the Palestinians. As long as this remains the case, they will continue to put a gun to our heads, to tell the world how they have been abandoned, and continued to die, in a world that doesn't want to know.

Certainly it is no bad thing if the events of September 11 raise interest in Islam and Palestine in our societies. However, as long as we maintain our current stance, the extreme social imbalance in the world will not disappear. It is my hope that, rather than attempting to understand Islam and the Palestinian issue for the sake of our own safety, we can go one step further, and share the problems. Because that is where the injustice lies. And, because we add to that injustice in a variety of ways. This is precisely why we must think hard about this. In short, I believe we need

to understand their problems because they are our problems, not because our own lives are threatened.