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SPIRITUAL LIFE

## Caucus on religion thumbs the past

The Boston Globe

By Rich Barlow, Globe Columnist | August 6, 2005

Recent headlines suggest that these are not the best of times for women in some Muslim countries. Drafters of the new Iraqi constitution may roll back women's rights in the areas of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In Pakistan, the government interprets Islamic law to permit the arrest for adultery of a woman who says she was raped unless she can produce four male Muslims to attest that they witnessed the assault.

Historians reveal that our current route came out of some surprising twists. Starting tomorrow, a conference at Dartmouth College on gender, Islam, and Judaism will feature historians whose research plumbs the past -- all the way back to antiquity in some cases -- to question contemporary notions about women and religion. The Hanover, N.H., campus will host nearly 40 scholars from around the world, from the Middle East to Massachusetts, to discuss men's and women's places in Islam and Judaism.

"This is really the first conference that I know of like this," said Susan Shapiro, director of the religious studies program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who is an invitee.

The prism of the past produces some surprises. Afsaneh Najmabadi, a Harvard University historian whose expertise includes her native Iran in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, said her remarks at the conference will note that in Iran during that time, "You don't get this disconnect between women's rights and Islamic activism as such. . . . They didn't experience women's rights as at odds with Islam."

This rupture between history and the present should not be overstated. Not all Muslim countries share this same history of regard for women, Najmabadi notes, and in Iran, the 1979 Islamic revolution rolled back women's rights. But by then, Islamic groups included female activists whose opportunities and education had blossomed under the previous freedoms, and they have fought back against an Islamic government seeking to make their lives harder, she says.

Pakistan's treatment of rape victims also jars with the past, according to Bernadette Broten, another conference attendee and director of the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University. She says government policy is a "total perversion" of traditional Islamic law, which says that a woman can only be convicted of adultery if four male witnesses testify against her.

Women's roles remain an issue, albeit less publicized in the general media, in Judaism as well. Barbara Geller, a professor of religion at Wellesley College,

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studies Jewish history during the Roman occupation of Palestine in the first century to discover what she calls a disparity between the role of women as outlined in the texts of rabbinic Judaism and the "evidence we have for the flesh-and-blood women of the Roman empire and Palestine."

The rabbis limited leadership and performance of commandments to men, she says. But archaeological and written evidence suggests that, at least for some upper-class women, their gender did not stand in the way of their opportunities. There are, for example, "inscriptions of Jewish synagogue leaders who were women," said Geller. And "at least some Roman-era Jewish women participated in the Greco-Roman practice of civic philanthropy . . . and received honors for it."

The other strain of Judaism at that time -- the Jesus movement that became Christianity -- produced Gospels with women who were often theologically smarter than their male counterparts.

"They got it," said Geller. "The women are presented as the followers of Jesus who understood his nature." St. Paul's letters refer to female partners in his missionary work, she added.

It's true that elite women of the Roman era weren't typical, Geller says.

Broten acknowledges that there are no strains of "I Am Woman" to be heard in many of the scriptures of Judaism and Islam, or Christianity for that matter; from the Bible to the Koran and the Talmud. "Patriarchy is really embedded within these three religious traditions," she said. "But the question is, can women adapt these traditions to bring out the best?"

If the past suggests there are alternatives to the present, it has another virtue: It can provide a forum for cooler, more civil discussion than the passions of the current moment.

"Students probably find it easier to discuss the water tunnels of Iron Age Jerusalem than to discuss Jerusalem as it intersects with the [Arab-Israeli] conflict," said Geller. "Less is at stake personally."

Questions, comments, and story ideas can be sent to [spiritual@globe.com](mailto:spiritual@globe.com). ■

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