

Clothes Aren't the Issue

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. When dealing with a "disobedient wife," a Muslim man has a number of options. First, he should remind her of "the importance of following the instructions of the husband in Islam." If that doesn't work, he can "leave the wife's bed." Finally, he may "beat" her, though it must be without "hurting, breaking a bone, leaving blue or black marks on the body and avoiding hitting the face, at any cost."

Such appalling recommendations, drawn from the book "Woman in the Shade of Islam" by Saudi scholar Abdul Rahman al-Sheha, are inspired by as authoritative a source as any Muslim could hope to find: a literal reading of the 34th verse of the fourth chapter of the Koran, *An-Nisa*, or Women. "[A]nd (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them," reads one widely accepted translation.

The notion of using physical punishment as a "disciplinary action," as Sheha suggests, especially for "controlling or mastering women" or others who "enjoy being beaten," is common throughout the Muslim world. Indeed, I first encountered Sheha's work at my Morgantown mosque, where a Muslim student group handed it out to male worshipers after Friday prayers one day a few years ago.

Verse 4:34 retains a strong following, even among many who say that women must be treated as equals under Islam. Indeed, Muslim scholars and leaders have long been doing what I call "the 4:34 dance" -- they reject outright violence against women but accept a level of aggression that fits contemporary definitions of domestic violence.

Western leaders, including British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, have recently focused on Muslim women's veils as an obstacle to integration in the West. But to me, it is 4:34 that poses the much deeper challenge of integration. How the Muslim world interprets this passage will reveal whether Islam can be compatible with life in the 21st century. As Hadayai Majeed, an African American Muslim who had opened a shelter in Atlanta to serve Muslim women, put it, "If it's okay for me to be a savage in my home, it's okay for me to be a savage in the world."

Not long after I picked up the free Saudi book, Mahmoud Shalash, an imam from Lexington, Ky., stood at the pulpit of my mosque and offered marital advice to the 100 or so men sitting before him. He repeated the three-step plan, with "beat them" as his final suggestion. Upstairs, in the women's balcony, sat a Muslim friend who had recently left her husband, who she said had abused her; her spouse sat among the men in the main hall.

At the sermon's end, I approached Shalash. "This is America," I protested. "How can you tell men to beat their wives?"

"They should beat them lightly," he explained. "It's in the Koran."

He was doing the dance.

Born into a conservative Muslim family that emigrated from Hyderabad, India, to West Virginia, I have seen many female relatives in India cloak themselves head to toe in black burqas and abandon their education and careers for marriage. But the Islam I knew was a gentle one. I was never taught that a man could -- or should -- physically discipline his wife. Abusing anyone, I was told, violated Islamic tenets against *zulm*, or cruelty. My family adhered to the ninth chapter of the Koran, which says that men and women "are friends and protectors of one another."

However, the kidnapping and killing of my friend and colleague Daniel Pearl in 2002 forced me to confront the link between literalist interpretations of the Koran that sanction violence in the world and those that sanction violence against women. For critics of Islam, 4:34 is the smoking gun that proves that Islam is misogynistic and intrinsically violent. Read literally, it is as troubling as Koranic verses such as *At-Tauba* ("The Repentance") 9:5, which states that Muslims should "slay the pagans wherever ye find them" or *Al-Mâ'idah* ("The Table Spread with Food") 5:51, which reads, "Take not the Jews and Christians as friends."

Although Islamic historians agree that the prophet Muhammad never hit a woman, it is also clear that Muslim communities face a domestic violence problem. A 2003 study of 216 Pakistani women found that 97 percent had experienced such abuse; almost half of them reported being victims of nonconsensual sex. Earlier this year, the state-run General Union of Syrian Women released a report showing that one in four married Syrian women is the victim of domestic violence.

Much of the problem is the 4:34 dance, which encourages this violence while producing interpretations that range from comical to shocking. A Muslim man in upstate New York, for instance, told his wife that the Koran allowed him to beat her with a "wet noodle." The host of a Saudi TV show displayed a pool cue as a disciplinary tool.

Modern debates over 4:34 inevitably hark back to a still widely used 1930 translation of the Koran by British Muslim Marmaduke Pickthall, who determined the verse to mean that, as a last resort, men can "scourge" their wives. A 1934 translation of the Koran, by Indian Muslim scholar A. Yusuf Ali, inserted a parenthetical qualifier: Men could "Beat them (lightly)."

By the 1970s, Saudi Arabia, with its ultra-traditionalist Wahhabi ideology, was providing the translations. Fueled by oil money, the kingdom sent its Korans to mosques and religious schools worldwide. A Koran available at my local mosque, published in 1985 by the Saudi government, adds yet another qualifier: "Beat them (lightly, if it is useful)."

Today, the Islamic Society of North America and popular Muslim Internet mailing lists such as SisNet and IslamIsTheTruth rely on an analysis from "Gender Equity in Islam," a 1995 book by Jamal Badawi, director of the Islamic Information Foundation in Canada. Badawi tries to take a stand against domestic violence, but like others doing the 4:34 dance, he leaves room for physical discipline. If a wife "persists in deliberate mistreatment and expresses contempt of her husband and disregard for her marital obligations," the husband "may resort to another measure that may save the marriage . . . more accurately described as a gentle tap on the body," he writes. "[B]ut never on the face," he adds, "making it more of a symbolic measure than a punitive one."

As long as the beating of women is acceptable in Islam, the problem of suicide bombers, jihadists and others who espouse violence will not go away; to me, they form part of a continuum. When 4:34 came into being in the 7th century, its pronouncements toward women were revolutionary, given that women were considered little more than chattel at the time. But 1,400 years later, the world is a different place and so, too, must our interpretations be different, retaining the progressive spirit of that verse.

Domestic violence is prevalent today in non-Muslim communities as well, but the apparent religious sanction in Islam makes the challenge especially difficult. Some people seem to understand this and are beginning to push back against the traditionalists. However, their efforts are concentrated in the West, and their impact remains small.

In his recent book "No god but God," Reza Aslan, an Islam scholar at the University of Southern California, dared to assert that "misogynistic interpretation" has dogged 4:34 because Koranic commentary "has been the exclusive domain of Muslim men." An Iranian American scholar recently published a new 4:34 translation stating that the "beating" step means "go to bed with them (when they are willing)."

Meanwhile, shelters created for Muslim women in Chicago and New York have begun to preach zero tolerance regarding the "disciplining" of women -- a position that should be universal by now. And some Muslim men appear to grasp the gravity of this issue. In Northern Virginia, for instance, an imam organized a group called Muslim Men Against Domestic Violence -- though it still endorses the "tapping" of a wife as a "friendly" reminder, an organizer said.

Yet even these small advances, if we can call them such, face an uphill battle against the Saudi oil money propagating literalist interpretations of the Koran here in the United States and worldwide.

Last October, I listened to an online audio sermon by an American Muslim preacher, Sheik Yusuf Estes, who was scheduled to speak at West Virginia University as a guest of the Muslim Student Association. He soon moved to the subject of disobedient wives, and his recommendations mirrored the literal reading of 4:34. First, "tell them." Second, "leave the bed." Finally: "Roll up a newspaper and give her a crack. Or take a yardstick, something like this, and you can hit."

When I telephoned Estes later to ask about the sermon, he said that he had been trying to limit how and when men could hit their wives. He realized that he had to revisit the issue, he told me, when some Canadian Muslim men asked him if they could use the Sunday newspaper to give their wives "a crack."

Yet even those doing the 4:34 dance seem to realize that there's a problem. When I went back to listen to the audio clip later, the offensive language had been removed. And when I asked Estes if he had ever rolled up a newspaper to give his own wife a crack, he responded without hesitation.

"I'm married to a woman from Texas," he said. "Do you know what she would do to me?"