

The Freedom & Justice Crier



Egalitarianism in Islam Robert Philbrook—In Memorium Reparations Workshop

We dedicate this issue
to Robert Philbrook

Understanding Egalitarianism in Islam ~Azam Saeed~

Azam Saeed, a former air force pilot from Pakistan, is now a U.S. citizen. Educated in physics with a master's degree in business administration, he has held management positions, in Europe as well as in the United States, with a number of multinational corporations. He has volunteered for AFSC and UNICEF and written widely on religion, international affairs, and civil rights. With four of the world's largest religions represented within his immediate family, he lives in Farmington, CT with his wife, Dr. Aysha Saeed.

We asked Azam Saeed to write for us about some aspects of Islam, acknowledging the great difficulty of treating so complex a subject within the stringent space limitations of the Crier. Since the role of women and the concept of jihad are widely discussed and profoundly misunderstood in the west, we felt that more knowledge in these areas would be of use to Friends as we hope to act as allies to our Muslim neighbors. Thus we begin our mini-series on Islam in this issue with this essay on "Understanding Egalitarianism in Islam." We look forward to an essay on "Understanding the concept of Jihad in Islam" which will appear in the summer Crier.

The egalitarian nature of Islam has been recognized by even its strongest critics. It is universally accepted that it is against the very grain of Islam to discriminate against a human being on any basis: race, color, gender etc. etc. Historically, this religion has always been most appealing to those population segments that have faced injustice or discrimination in any society. In the United States, for example, Islam became popular in the 1960s, and today some one-quarter of the 7 million Muslims are African Americans.

As for the role of women in Muslim society, what we see is the disparity among the principle, the practice, and the perception. And it is important we understand the chasm among these three conflicting realities as well as the drivers of this phenomenon in the context of the prevailing socio-political environment. The injustices we see all over the world—especially those committed in the name of one religion or the other—are not because of the teachings of the religion; rather

they take place despite the teachings of the religion. This applies as much to Islam as it does to Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism.

Karen Armstrong, in her book *A History of God*, explains this phenomenon in the following way:

The religion of al-Lah introduced the compassionate ethos which was the hallmark of the more advanced religions: brotherhood and social justice were its crucial virtues. A strong egalitarianism would continue to characterize the Islamic ideal.

During Muhammad's lifetime, this had included the equality of the sexes. Today it is common in the West to depict Islam as an inherently misogynistic religion, but, like Christianity, the religion of al-Lah was originally positive for women. During the jahiliyyah, the pre-Islamic period, Arabia had preserved



Student in Birzeit University, West Bank, Palestine, photo by Skip Schiel, November 2003

the attitudes towards women which had prevailed before the Axial Age. Polygamy, for example, was common, and wives remained in their father's households. Elite women enjoyed considerable power and prestige—Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, for example, was a successful merchant – but the majority were on a par with slaves; they had no political or human rights, and female infanticide was common. Women had been among Muhammad's earliest converts, and their emancipation was a project that was dear to his heart. The Koran strictly forbade the killing of female children and rebuked the Arabs for their dismay when a girl was born. It also gave women legal rights of inheritance and divorce: most Western women had nothing comparable until the nineteenth century. Muhammad encouraged women to play an active role in the affairs of the ummah, and they expressed their views forthrightly, confident that they would be heard...

Unfortunately, as in Christianity, the religion was later hijacked by the men, who interpreted texts in a way that was negative for Muslim women... They adopted the customs of veiling women and secluding them in harems from Persia and Christian Byzantium, where women had long been marginalized in this way. By the time of the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258), the position of Muslim women as bad as that of their sisters in Jewish and Christian society.

It is noteworthy that the word Allah (God in Arabic) does not have a plural or gender. Complementarily, a number of qualities and names are attributed to God: some male and some female. Here I would like to refer to a Muslim scholar, Abdul Hakim Murad:

The Sufi metaphysicians were drawing on a long-standing distinction between the Divine Names that were called Names of Majesty (jalal), and the Names of Beauty (jamal). The Names of Majesty included Allah

as Powerful (al-Qawi), Overwhelming (al-Jabbar), Judge (al-Hakam); and these were seen as pre-eminently masculine. Names of Beauty included the All-Compassionate (al-Rahman), the Mild (al-Halim), the Loving-kind (al-Wadud), and so on: seen as archetypically feminine. The crux is that neither set could be seen as pre-eminent, for all were equally Names of God. In fact, by far the most conspicuous of the Divine Names in the Koran is al-Rahman, the All-Compassionate. And the explicitly feminine resonances of this name were remarked upon by the Prophet (s.w.s.)

himself, who taught that rahma, loving compassion, is an attribute derived from the word rahim, meaning a womb. (Bukhari, Adab, 13) The cosmic matrix from which differentiated being is fashioned is thus, as in all primordial systems, explicitly feminine; although Allah 'an sich' remains outside qualification by gender or by any other property.

Islamic history is full of great women. One of the greatest is Mary, the mother of Jesus, to whom a whole chapter is dedicated in the Koran. There are countless others: Khadija, Aysha, Rabia ... the list goes on.

For Muslim men and Muslim women, for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for true men and true 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 (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise, for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward. [33:35]

Even in the context of patriarchal Arabia, the Quran gives the example of a female ruler: Bilqis or Queen of Sheba is depicted extremely well in the Quran. In fact, other than the prophets, she is the only ruler in the Quran who is given favorable consideration. The Quran refers to her characteristics of wisdom and independence as a leader.

Furthermore, Prophet Muhammad is instructed in the Koran:

O Prophet, when believing women come to you to take the oath of fealty ... receive their oath of fealty" (60:12)

This established the right of women, fourteen hundred years ago, to publicly select their leader and participate in the affairs of the state. We can compare this to the women's suffrage movement in the West, especially the United States: the 19th amendment was not ratified until 1921.

The present-day abuse of human rights and women's rights in the world, including the "Islamic" societies, has little to do with what happened hundreds or thousands of years ago. A more relevant driver of the phenomenon could be found in the past few decades of political evolution in the world. The point of all this is not to gloss over or minimize the serious human rights abuses especially against minorities, women, and children that go on in the so-called Muslim countries. My hope is that, by openly delving into such subjects, fair-minded people in Europe and North America would be able to develop a more sound understanding of the various dimensions of the game of global power-play, and the heavy price the human race pays at this chess board.



Student in Birzeit University, West Bank, Palestine, photo by Skip Schiel, November 2003

In Memory of Robert Philbrook (July 2, 1930 - September 30, 2003)

~Rob Yager~

Rob Yager, a medical doctor based in New Hampshire, served with Bob for many years on the (then named) Committee on Prejudice and Poverty.

I met Bob Philbrook in 1990, the first time I attended NEYM sessions. Last summer's sessions [2003] did not seem quite right without him. Bob had suffered a heart attack late last June, and was in the hospital in Portland. He died from complications of his heart attack on September 30, 2003, at the age of 73.

Bob led a workshop on the welfare system the summer that we met. His basic message, as I remember it, was that the welfare system was a mess, designed by people with power to make themselves feel good by creating the appearance that they were doing something meaningful to meet the needs of the poor when in reality the system would never work and would never cost those with money and power much of their wealth. The system was so complicated to navigate that those who most needed its help rarely could jump through all of its hoops to collect all of the benefits that it promised.

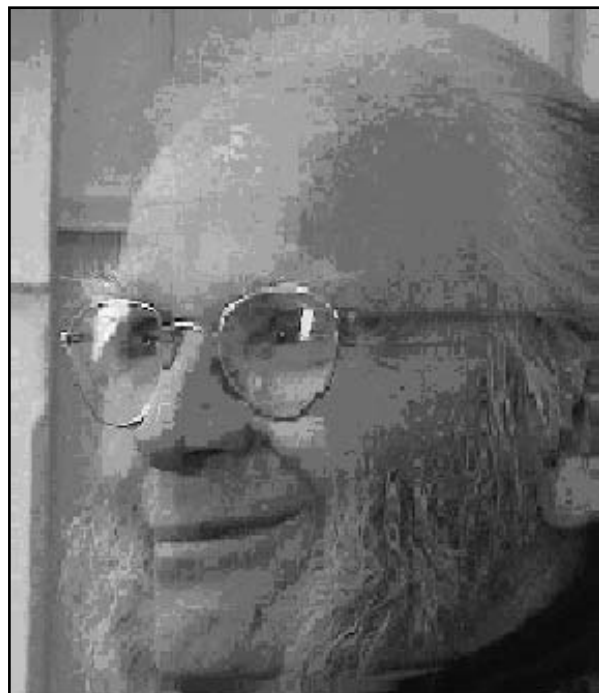
Bob brought this message wherever he went, whether to Yearly Meeting Sessions or to the State House in Augusta, Maine, where he was an advocate for the poor for over 30

years. "Just his presence in the room would assure that the issues of the poor and under-served would rise to the top of the discussion," said Dora Mills, director of the Bureau of Health in the Maine Department of Human Services. "He spoke so effectively. He was a loving advocate who saw the good in everyone that he encountered."

Bob had little patience with those who blame the poor for their situation. I often heard him say, "It is not the poor who are evil: poverty is evil." He would then launch into a litany of stories that made clear how difficult it is to rise out of poverty.

He had little patience with prejudice. He felt the sting of prejudice, active and passive, intended and unintended, everywhere he went. His body, stunted by a severe case of polio at age six months, often brought stares. Watching him labor from place to place, both hands gripping his sole crutch, one could easily see the need for "handicapped" access. Curbs, steps, and doors all presented challenges to Bob. When we planned meetings he would gently ask us please to have someone with a walking disability share in the site selection so that he and others whose walking was limited could participate fully. I clearly remember at Bryant College

how he would wave his crutch from the back of the auditorium



Courtesy of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods & Maine Equal Justice

to get the Clerk's attention, because he could not walk down into the well-lit front of the hall, and he could not raise his hand high enough to attract attention.

While Bob's body was small, his spirit was enormous. His smile could light up the room. His generosity seemed boundless. He did not have money to spare. But he was always ready to share his wealth of knowledge and problem solving skills. A watchmaker by training, it seemed he could fix anything. I

Reparations: the Legacy of Slavery & New England Yearly Meeting's Freedmen's Fund

A one day workshop at NEYM Sessions, 2004. The yearly meeting administers a fund to educate descendants of slaves. Is it time to divest of these monies? Organized by the Committee on Racial, Social, and Economic Justice, the workshop will provide background for grappling with this question .

have heard that he never paid more than \$500 for a car, but he kept his cars running well and reliably long after most of us would have passed them on to the kid down the block or sent them to the junk yard.



Bob was a tireless advocate for economic and social justice. He served on the Yearly

Meeting Permanent Board, the Committee on Prejudice and Poverty, the Peace and Social Concerns Committee, to name a few. He represented NEYM on the board of the American Friends Service Committee. In Maine he founded the group We Who Care to advocate for poor

people and provide temporary housing and support. He was an advisor and board member for many groups, including the Maine Association for Interdependent Neighborhoods, the Maine Equal Justice Project, the Peoples Regional Opportunity Program, the Youth Opportunity Office, and the Polio Support Group.

He was a suicide prevention counselor and a field service coordinator for the University of Maine, where he worked to bring services to the disadvantaged.

In 1974 he ran for Portland City Council, "because it is time the city recognized the human needs rather than the construction needs. There have been enough new buildings and fancy roads." In 1990 he ran for the Maine House of Representatives. "The poor don't have power," he said, "so they need the legislative representation more." It didn't seem to matter that he lost his races: he was present frequently

to testify before committees and to lobby for social justice. "Bob had an influence over the policy discussions taking place," said Dora Mills. "He made sure those issues were on the table."

In addition to being a fierce advocate for justice, Bob was an attentive listener with a gift for friendship and a twinkle in his eye. "His" table at Yearly Meeting dining halls was always crowded with the many of us who sought out his wit and his wonderful stories. One cherished image we carry with us is of Bob and his trumpet, a glorious star of Yearly Meeting coffeehouses.

Bob was married to his wife Sandy for 34 years. He spoke of their six sons with a love and warmth that was wonderful to hear. They and several hundred friends whose lives Bob had touched bid him farewell at a memorial service at Woodfords Congregational Church in Portland on October 5, 2003.

Grants from the Committee on Racial, Social & Economic Justice

For information and application forms, please write or phone: Sam Lowe,
122 Cedar Street, Lexington, MA, 02421, 781-863-5478, chenlowe@gis.net.

Our next issue of the *Crier*

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In the works are another article from Azam Saeed, "Understanding the Concept of Jihad in Islam;" "Notes on the History of Quakers and Racism" by Vanessa Julye & Donna McDaniel; profiles of committee members, and material about reparations.

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Other issues on line at <<http://neym.org/PrejudiceAndPoverty/index.html>>