Life as a Woman in the Context of Islam

Part 1 of 2: Growing Up in the Middle East
with Darrell L. Bock and Miriam
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of religion and God and culture. And, today, our topic is life in the context of Islam. I'm Darrell Bock, Executive Director of the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and for Cultural Engagement, and I'm Executive Director of Cultural Engagement there.

And we're doing something a little unusual today because of the topic. We are interviewing someone who will not be on camera. This is to protect identity. And so we're also using a pseudonym as well. We confess to that at the start. And so my guest is Miriam, who has come to the States from the Middle East. Good morning.

Good morning.

And we will be talking about life in the context of Islam and about Islam in general. Miriam came to faith here in the States, but grew up in the context of Islam. So she can tell us about life from within the faith, as well as looking at life from the outside, now that she has come to the Lord.

So we're going to walk through her story, but you will not see her. You will only hear her voice, and the voice that you hear is actually not her voice, but a voice that has been digitally rearranged — if I can say it that way — again, because we're concerned to protect identity here.

So, Miriam, thank you for coming in and being willing to interact with us and tell us about life in the context of Islam.

Well, growing up in the Middle East, it's very hard to separate culture from the religion. There were a lot of things, for example, that we dealt with as far as the culture was concerned, like arranged marriage. According to Islam, my dad did not have the right to force me to marry; however, in the Middle Eastern culture, my dad had the right to choose a husband for me and to force me to get married. So there is a big huge misconception, I think, here in the United States between the culture and the religion.

Naturally, with the religion, I grew up thinking that I had a lot of rights in Islam. I had the right to choose my husband, I had the right to education, I had the right to be a school teacher, or to be a professional, and to be a wife. So there is a difference between the Arab culture and the religion. And I think a lot of what happens as we look at the Middle East, we think that what is culture is actually religion, and it's not. There's a big difference between the two.
Okay, and that's a very interesting way to lead off, so I'm going to let you develop that a little bit more. What aspects would you say are a reflection of Arab culture, and which aspects would you say are a reflection of Islam?

Well, you know, certainly in the Islamic religion, the Sharia law requires that a woman wears head covering, and a woman prays five times a day, just like anybody else. There are certain parts of the religion – For example, Muhammad said that women lack religion and lack knowledge, and the reason why they lack religion and lack knowledge is because they think emotionally. And so they don't think cognitively, because they put their emotions in it. So he said that. And then he said that they lack religion because of the fact that women cannot pray during their menstrual cycle, during the 40 days after having a child, and so he says that they lack religion in that respect. So there is that, you know, as far as religion. And he did say that most of the women – or most of the dwellers of hell are going to be women, because they gossip and they are not very appreciative – at least that was his explanation of why most of the hell dwellers are going to be women. So in that regard, that is religion. But as far as not being able to go to school – for example, when the Taliban came and took over in Afghanistan, they would not allow women to become teachers. They basically shut the doors of schools and they made women stop being doctors, because that was just their culture. It had nothing to do with religion.

Interesting. So we've got a distinction that really does impact. And I think most Americans are aware of this. It does impact the role of women both in Arab culture and in Islam. And would it be fair to say that the two play off of each other to a certain extent, that there's a certain position or role that women have in the context of Islam that has fed the way the culture also treats women?

Absolutely. And I think there was an aspect of the culture that Islam came and kind of sanctified a little bit, because according to the Arab culture pre-Islamic times, they had the right to bury their daughters alive because of the honor and shame system. You know, we talk about honor killing and we hear about honor killing in the Middle East, but that has nothing to do with religion. It has absolutely nothing to do with religion.
Now, according to the Islamic religion, they have the right to kill me as a woman, but they have the right to kill any man as well for converting, to become an apostate. If you leave the religion, then you have the right to be killed, and it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman. However, in the Middle Eastern culture, they have a right to kill their daughters even today for dishonoring the family. So that a lot to do with the culture and not to do with the religion.

_Darrell Bock:_ Okay. Well, you brought up a few things here – let me help people with. Sharia law – explain what that is.

_Miriam:_ The Sharia law is really very – if I could simplify it to the absolute max, the Sharia law says that you are to follow first what the Qur'an says. And if it's not written in the Qur'an, then you'd go to the Hadith, which are the sayings of Muhammad and the life of Muhammad. And if that's not written in there, if there's nothing – a particular topic that's written in there, then you go to the leaders, the Muslim leaders, and they decide based on principle.

So, you know, for example, the issue of a woman driving. First, you go to the Qur'an and you decide, "Is it written in the Qur'an whether a woman can drive or not?"

_Darrell Bock:_ Okay. I imagine there are no cars in the Qur'an.

_Miriam:_ There are no cars.

_Darrell Bock:_ Okay, okay.

_Miriam:_ And then you'd go to what Muhammad had said. Did Muhammad talk about, again, a woman not driving a car or not being able to drive a car? Well, he didn't, because during this time, there were no driving cars. So then you go back to the Muslim leaders, and then they decide, based on the principles of what is found in the Qur'an, "Is it permissible for a woman to drive a car or not?" And there are some who have said yes, and there are some who have said no.

_Darrell Bock:_ Oh, so I guess you can sort of drive.

_Miriam:_ You can sort of drive. It depends on what country you live in.
Darrell Bock: Okay. And then let's talk a little bit about growing up in the context of Islam. Talk about the week. For example, the holy day is a different day of the week than either for Judaism or Christianity. So could you explain that for people?

Miriam: Sure. You know, for Muslims, it's considered Friday; for Jews, it's considered Saturday; and for Christians, it's considered Sunday. And they believe that Friday is a holy day, because that is the day that God has set aside for Muslims to worship.

Darrell Bock: Now when you go to the mosque on a holy day, on a Friday, is this something that only men do, or do women go? And how does that work?

Miriam: Well, according to Sharia law, according to Islam, women are not obligated to go, but men are obligated to go. Obviously, Islam is a very works-based religion, and so the more you do, the more points you have. For men, it's obligatory for them to go to the mosque and to pray in the mosque actually even five times a day. It's very obligatory for them.

For a woman, Muhammad decided that it wasn't obligatory for a woman to go, just because she had kids and young kids, but she could go if she wanted to go. And there are even sayings of Muhammad in history where he would have the women, you know, standing in the back and the men are front. And the reason why he did that was because, you know, when a woman is bending down, he doesn't want a man behind her looking at her as she's bending down.

So that's why women are to stand in the back and men are to stand in the front. And so when he would hear a child crying and he knew that a woman was in the back of the ranks, he would finish up the prayer very quickly, because he knew the woman had to attend to her child.

Darrell Bock: So now I've been in Turkey during the week, and I actually remember having a meal right next to a mosque, and watching the men, in particular, go in and wash before they go into the service. Now that's something we don't do in Christianity, so explain what that's all about.
Miriam: Sure. You know, it is required for Muslims to cleanse themselves before they go in and pray. And not only is it obligatory for men, but it's also obligatory for women. A man has to completely wash up. If he has had relations with his wife the night before, he has to completely bathe himself. So there's a whole lot of cleansing. You have to go clean, basically, before God to pray.

Darrell Bock: I see.

Miriam: Yeah.

Darrell Bock: Now why is it – this is a cultural question as well as a religious question. You know, a lot of the unrest that we've seen during the Arab spring takes place on Fridays – at least some of the major events and marches and that kind of thing. How does that work if it's a holy day and I'm supposed to be obligated to be at the mosque, then how is it that Friday ends up being the big protest day in Arab countries?

Miriam: It's probably the time where imams gather men the most, and oftentimes, imams are talking about political issues. And so when they talk about political issues, and they go into the mosque, and these men hear about how we should protest, they're going to arouse people to do that, and that's perfect timing for the imams to get people going. So I think it's really led by a lot of imams.

Darrell Bock: Okay. And, again, explain who an imam is.

Miriam: An imam is a Muslim leader. It's kind of like a pastor that preaches on Sundays. Well, they have an imam that speaks to them and provides what they call the message, the Hutma, on Fridays.

Darrell Bock: Now what is the relationship of an imam to the larger culture? What role do they play within the culture? Because that appears to be somewhat different than what we normally see here as well in terms of the role of a way a pastor might function in relationship to a culture here.

Miriam: I think it's really different. It depends on which country you're living in.
Again, I think in Saudi Arabia, they have much more control over there than they would in other countries. But, you know, they certainly do have the power to motivate people and to encourage them to do certain things. And so a lot of times what these imams are talking about are political issues, and oftentimes, they're talking about, "Well, is it permissible to do a certain thing that's not in the Qur'an, that's not in the Hadith?"

You know, people go and ask for advice and say, "Well, you know, my wife did this. What should I do?" Or, "My husband did this. What should I do?" And so they act as advisors oftentimes of what people should and shouldn't do, but they are also motivators.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay. Now what kinds of stereotypes might Americans have about Muslims that they ought not to have?

**Miriam:** That they're all terrorists –

**Darrell Bock:** Okay.

**Miriam:** – because they're not all terrorists. And I often tell people that if you look at Muslims as people who are here in American because of the same reasons why you came to America – to have a better life, to provide a better education for your kids – I think it'll change everything. And I often say to my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that God didn't pick us because we're something special, he picked us because He's something special.

And so that levels the playing field, because we're not better than Arabs, we're not better than Muslims. We're not better just because we live here in the United States. We are privileged and we are blessed by the Lord. But apart from the grace of God, I don't know why we're here.

**Darrell Bock:** So Muslims are not terrorists. I'll tell you, our time in Turkey when we were there – obviously, predominately an Islamic country, almost no Christian presence to speak of at all – and we were impressed by the hospitality that we received and the courtesy. Even when we were trying to get directions and didn't know the language, the people would make the effort to try and help us. And so talk a little bit about the kinds of Muslims one might meet, both here in the States, and also, perhaps, if you found yourself in an Arab country.
Miriam: You know, that's very interesting that you say that, Dr. Bock, because I had heard a missionary woman that lived in a Middle Eastern country with her husband, and she stood up, and her testimony was that she felt like these Arab women were Jesus to her far more than a lot of her neighbors when she had lived in the United States, because they were kind to her, they were very helpful to her. Whenever she needed to go to the hospital, they came and they took her kids in. And so that's what you'll find with Arabs.

Just because, for example, if you see a woman in the grocery store who's wearing a head covering, I promise you, she doesn't have a bomb under that head covering, she just doesn't. And she may look different and it may look intimidating to us, but she's a woman that has the same needs as any other woman that is in the grocery store. She's hungry, she's trying to feed her kids, she wants a better life for her kids, she wants a better life for her family, and so you'll find a lot hospitality.

I oftentimes work with a lot of refugees that come to the United States, and I encourage women to go and minister to these women. And, oftentimes, these women from the church will come to me and say, you know, "It's amazing, because I feel like they are ministering to me." And so we have to open the door.

God's heart, God's vision, the end goal is that every tribe, every tongue, every nation will bow their knee to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That's going to include a whole lot of Arabs, and a whole lot of Muslims, and a whole lot of tribes from Middle Eastern countries.

Darrell Bock: All right, let's talk a little bit about your life growing up in the context of Islam. What would you say about that? How would you describe the way you were raised, and what would be involved in your life, and what was central to your life as you were growing up? And a way to help with the question might be to talk about things, in particular, that might be like growing up here, and things that would be very different.

Miriam: Well, you know, I think I grew up – it's a broad question.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, right, it is.
Miriam: So I think with the similarities as far as, you know, growing up here – growing up in America versus growing up in the Middle East is, you know, I wanted to have an education, I wanted to be able to work, I wanted to be able to do those things. Obviously, the culture played a huge part in it where my dad wanted to make sure I was married at a young age, and I had my own home, and had my own family, and that was a big concern within the Middle Eastern culture.

A big part of Islam and a big part of the Arab culture is the whole idea of marriage, and the whole idea of raising a family and being a mother. That was very central in the Middle East and growing up as a Muslim. And, obviously, it's all about works. I mean I think if I can say, you know, a big huge comparison between Islam and Christianity as far as the religions are concerned is, I grew up with no hope. I had no hope, no eternal hope.

But now I have hope. I have hope in the fact that Christ died on the cross for me. He made a way for me. He came down to me, rather than me try to climb to him to reach him. And that is a huge difference, I think. And so the good works were based on my fear.

Fear plays a big huge role in Islam, whereas the Bible clearly says that there is no fear in love, that love casts out all fear. And so I grew up fearful – fearful of God, fearful of how God may punish me, fearful of how God may feel about me. Whereas, in Christianity, I have peace – the peace that passes all understanding. I have hope, which did not exist in Islam.

Darrell Bock: Now you talked about the kind of hopes that you had in terms of an education and that kind of thing. Let's talk about one other element of Arab culture that I think is important, that most people I think do not realize about many countries in the Middle East. It may not be true across the board. And, again, I'm drawing on my own experience in the context of having spent some time in Turkey.

There are very religious-oriented Muslims – if I can say it that way. But there also is a strong secular strand of culture related – it's Islamic, but it's more secular. And we see these tensions in several Middle Eastern countries – I'm thinking of Egypt, I'm thinking of Turkey, etcetera.

Miriam: Sure.
Darrell Bock: Talk a little bit about that, because on the one hand, the goals of someone who comes out of a more secularized form of Islam and the way they approach life is very different from their Muslim neighbors – if I can say it that way – who are more – and I don't even know what the right word to use – more traditionally religious or more intensely religious about their faith. Explain those issues and tensions a little bit.

Miriam: Well, you know, obviously, one of the things that I've heard some pastors say is that, you know, we don't love Islam, but we love Muslims. We love the people. We don't love the religion, we love the people.

In the Middle East, they don't separate the two. Whether you're secular or whether you're devout, being a Muslim is who you are. So when we start talking negatively about Islam, they're automatically offended by it personally – and, obviously, we've seen that in the media – because you've just offended who they are. And even though some of these people who have gone out and rioted about certain things are probably not even very religious people.

And with Islam, the hard thing about Islam is it's very hard to tell who's very devout and who's really very secular. And I've seen this happen with my own family. You can go for several years where, you know, as a woman, you're wearing the head covering and you're following Islam and you're doing all that. But one of the hard things about being a human being is you can't keep up, you just can't keep up. And so then they leave it for a while, and then they come back to it, and then they become devout.

And so it's kind of an ebb and flow relationship with God and with Islam, as sometimes you're very, very devout, and other times, you're really not devout at all. You're not even praying at all. And so it's very hard to separate, because there's a whole lot of gray areas there, you know, as far as the Muslim culture is concerned, and as far as religiosity is concerned. Most of the time, you just can't keep up with it.

Darrell Bock: But would it be fair to say that there is a tension, at least in some context, between the people who are more secular, and might even be – and I'll even say it this way – it may even be more influenced by the larger culture of the world in some ways – a little more materialistic and a little more – you know, they have educational goals and that kind of thing in the more – again, traditional and stricter form of Islam which tends to separate itself very much from those kinds of goals.
I mean one of the things that struck me being in Istanbul, for example, was there are many parts of Istanbul where you feel like, "I could be in Europe."

Miriam: Yeah.

Darrell Bock: "I don't feel I'm in the Middle East at all." And except for the minarets sounding off for the time of prayer and that kind of thing, that's the only way you know you're in the Middle East. And I think that impacts the understanding of who Arabs are.