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# But is that what's really going on here?

Joan Chittister | Sep. 15, 2006 From Where I Stand

***Editor's Note:*** *NCR is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated-user system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link:Sign-up Page[1]. The new system will help you and us control spam.*

**I** found myself struggling with a question this week; When is a revolution not a revolution? What did I decide? Answer: I'm not sure. But one thing I do know: This time, we may all be looking at one revolution that is hiding in plain sight.

Newspapers across the country recently carried a story concerned, ostensibly, with the rising interest of Syrian girls in the study of the Koran.

Teenage girls, it seems, have developed madrasas, Islamic schools, for girls as young as five years old. Other young women have created secret study groups designed to give older girls advanced education in the Koran.

Some writers interpret the story as sign of a sharp move away from the established secular government in the country. They see it as simply one more indicator of an emerging interest in the establishment of a religious state in Syria as well as in other parts of the Muslim world. It signals for them the kind of moment that could eventually pit proponents of Islamic theocracy against the more pluralistic character of the secular state with its separation of religion and the political system.

Other writers dismiss the story entirely except to wonder why women would be interested in any religion that counseled stoning them to death. These readers are, apparently, completely oblivious to the fact that the whole history of religion with women more often belies the ideals of religion -- any religion -- than enhances them.

I figured that both interpretations, however well-founded each might be from one particular perspective or another, may well be missing a dimension of far greater significance than either of those. This story is about a great deal more than religion.

Whatever their interest in the Koran as a spiritual document, Muslim girls -- like Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish and Catholic girls, as well -- have normally been denied the right to be the religious scholars, imams, rabbis, priests or ordained monastics of their various faith communities. Just as women were not permitted to get academic degrees in Catholic theology before the 1940s, Muslim women have also not been permitted to be imams or prayer leaders of mixed gender congregations.

Despite the presence of women in leadership positions in the early history of every major religion, the place of the role of women in religion is everywhere today still a major question.

But religion is not the only thing going on in this movement of Syrian women to appropriate the scriptures for themselves. This movement is as surely about feminism and women's rights as it is about learning the Koran.

These are young women teaching women. In one case, a 16 year old teaches five year olds to memorize the Koran. In another, a young 20 year old is teaching her peers not simply to recite the verses of the Koran but to probe their history and meaning. *"People mistake tradition for religion," a young woman explains to a reporter. "Men are always saying, 'Women can't do that because of religion,' when in fact it is only tradition. It's important for us to study so that we will know the difference."* ( "Islamic Revival in Syria is Led by Women," NYT, Aug. 29, 2006)

Clearly there is more than a catechism mentality at stake. These are women making independent decisions about things as important as whether women are allowed to meet together without male approval -- and teaching other women to do the same.

Despite centuries of male norms governing women's lives, these women are beginning to think through scriptural interpretations that have passed for religious dictates for centuries and to interpret them differently than men, especially in areas that affect women.

What's more, they are doing it, they say, in order to be able to contribute to the development of the tradition themselves, something left almost entirely to men -- at least until now.

And, to add insult to injury, they are doing it in women's groups for women only. The implications of such a movement as that for the development of both society and religion are overwhelming.

First, God is becoming the property of females as well as males and, as a result, looking less gendered, more truly spirit, by the day.

Second, this is not conservative Islam we're seeing, this is Islamic feminism, whether we recognize it or not. For those who might be tempted to consider "Islamic feminism" an oxymoron, it may be time to start thinking otherwise.

As the Arab's say, "The camel's nose is under the tent," and it is neither Western nor anti-Western in its intent. It is simply one more instance of the rising consciousness of women everywhere as they seek to take their proper places in the world.

It's a revolution, all right, but it is changing more than the secular government of Syria. It is changing the world everywhere.

The secret is out. Women are human beings. They are fully human. And they intend to claim that humanity, however revered the institution that is inclined to say no to their full presence in it.

It is more than possible, then, that we're seeing two revolutions at once. One may well be political. Maybe something is happening to government in Syria. Maybe these groups really are the seeds of a frontal attack on secularism and the first stirrings of an Islamist state.

But the other revolution is yet largely invisible, but growing. And it is a great deal more important than the political one because it signals the change of the world. Or as the Chinese proverb puts it, "When sleeping women wake, mountains will move."

From where I stand, it seems to me that we may be seeing a lot more than we think we're seeing. Shouldn't we tell somebody?

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