KEY ISSUE

Interpretations of Religious Doctrine

Throughout history, religious beliefs, traditions and teachings have been used both to justify and to denounce the use of violence against women. When religious teachings are used to justify domestic violence, they become a tool by which batterers assume and maintain power and control over their partners. The use of these teachings to justify abusive behavior and the imbalance of power within a relationship can also further contribute to the feelings of guilt and self-blame many victims experience as a result of the abuse. Some interpretations of religious texts and teachings imply that husbands have absolute authority over obedient and submissive wives. However, after a careful examination of these teachings in their full context, many religious scholars argue that it is inappropriate to use them to support misogynist behavior within a relationship or to generalize these beliefs to the treatment of women within the larger community.

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JUDAISM

Marriage in the Jewish tradition is viewed as an expression of the holiness of a man and a woman and as necessary for fulfillment, and is based on mutual love and respect (Fortune, 1991). Despite this fact, the core value of *Shalom Bayit*, or peace in the home (Fortune, 1991), has been interpreted to imply that the sole responsibility of maintaining peace and promoting love, nurturing and understanding in the family is that of the woman (Jewish Community Help and Abuse Information, n.d.). *Shalom Bayit* may be a reason why many Jewish women stay in abusive relationships, in that a victim of domestic violence may be reluctant to seek help because she may feel she failed at her role to maintain the peace in her home; she may be fearful of bringing *shanda*, or shame, on her family and the community (Jewish Women International, 1996). Many people falsely believe that domestic violence does not exist in Jewish homes, and this myth reinforces the silence that allows domestic violence to continue. By bringing attention to the abusive relationship, the victim has not only exposed her imperfect marriage, but she has also exposed the vulnerabilities of her community and may be ostracized or resented for doing so.

Many Jewish texts condemn violence against women and can be viewed as resources for Jewish women in abusive relationships. *Judaism and Domestic Violence* outlines several Talmudic and Rabbinic texts that condemn violence against women and set a standard for behavior. Jewish law states that if a man loves his wife as prescribed, his home will be a place of peace (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism [USCJ], 1995). Rabbi Moshe Isserles commented specifically on what the Jewish attitude is toward a man who strikes his wife: any man who strikes his wife commits a sin and if he does this frequently, it is up to the courts to punish and excommunicate him (USCJ, 1995). Messages such as these not only condemn violence against women, they provide guidelines toward the development of *Shalom Bayit* in the family.

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ISLAM

For Muslim men and women, the Qur'an is the primary source of their faith and practice. In Islam, the focus of marriage is encapsulated in the following verse of the Qur'an: "...they are a sort of garment for you and you are a sort of garment for them..." (2:188). Qur'anic verse 4:34 is often used to justify physical abuse against a wife if she does not submit to her partner's authority. It states:

> Men shall take full care of women with the bounties Allah has bestowed upon them, and what they may spend out of their possession; as Allah has eschewed each with certain qualities in relation to the other. And the righteous women are the truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy, which Allah has ordained to be guarded. As for those women whose ill-will you have reason to fear, admonish them [first]; then distance yourself in bed, and then tap them; but if they pay you heed, do not seek to harm them. Surely, Allah is indeed the Most High, the Greatest.

This verse may not only be interpreted by batterers to justify physical abuse against their wives, but also to support the belief that the role of men as maintainors and protectors of their wives implies unquestionable obedience to men. Many scholars, however, have interpreted this translation as charging men with the responsibility of financially and physically protecting and caring for their wives and families. Others have noted that the role of "protector" is synonymous with someone who has the responsibility of safeguarding the interests of another, and not the imposition of authority (Faizi, 2000).

If a wife is deliberately unfaithful (short of adultery) to her husband, instructions are given on how to attempt to resolve this situation. It is the husband's responsibility to first talk to her and then refuse to share her bed. If this fails to resolve the issue, then, only as a last resort before seeking a divorce, a husband may "tap" his wife in a symbolic effort to demonstrate his seriousness in the matter (Alkhateeb, n.d.). Many scholars of the Qur'an have debated over the appropriate translation of the word "tap" as the original Arabic word carries several different meanings (Khan, n.d.). In some texts, it is translated as "hit" or "strike"; however, many scholars believe that this is an incorrect translation of the original Arabic word, based on the Prophet's lifelong abhorrence of hitting women (Alkhateeb, n.d.). Additionally, by examining classical

commentaries by Muslim jurists, the "tap" is intended to be a symbolic gesture as with a toothbrush or a folded handkerchief so as not to cause pain (Khan, n.d.). If a woman fears that her husband will be abusive or is unfaithful she has the option of enlisting the support of the community by sitting down with her husband and respected members of the community to draw up a contract with her husband as an ultimatum and an attempt to resolve the issue before she seeks a divorce (Khan, n.d.). In essence, "the Qur'an does not discriminate between the two sexes in any way that undermines their full worth as equal human beings, nor does it give either of them; men or women, priority or superiority over the other in any manner whatsoever, neither does it endorse spouse abuse nor does it encourage spouse battering" (Khan, n.d.).

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CHRISTIANITY

Similar interpretations have been given to Biblical texts that also focus on gender roles within heterosexual marriages. Traditionally, Christian teaching about the roles of husbands and wives within a marriage rely heavily on Ephesians 5:21-33 (Fortune, 1991). Nine of the twelve verses discuss the responsibility of a husband to his wife. The remaining three verses, when taken in isolation, may be interpreted to imply that the husband has absolute authority over the family and this authority cannot be questioned, and that wives, in turn, must demonstrate absolute obedience and summarily submit to abuse from their husbands:

> Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the Church submits to Christ, so also the wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:22-24 in Fortune, 1991)

It is important to note, however, that Ephesians 5:21 begins by saying: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Miles, 2002). As was seen in the translation of the Qur'an, certain key words in the Bible also have ambiguous meanings in translation. Several Greek words are commonly understood to be related to the word "submission" in the Christian scriptures; essentially, however, Ephesians both implicitly and explicitly calls for husbands and wives to "behave responsibly towards one another, align themselves and to relate to one another in a meaningful and respectful way" (Miles, 2002).

Reverend Marie Fortune (1991) states that the first verse of Ephesians clearly indicates that all Christians are to be mutually subject, or accommodating, to each other, which implies sensitivity, flexibility, and responsiveness of the husband. She goes on to suggest that the husband-wife relationship described in Ephesians 5:23-24 is based on the relationship of Christ to the church. The teaching and ministry of Jesus was one of service to others and to the church, not one of dominance and authority over

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others. Therefore, a Christian husband who truly believes and understands the teachings of Jesus will not dominate or control his wife, but serve and care for her:

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or blemish or any other wrinkle, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife, loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body.
> (Ephesians 5:25-29)

DIVORCE

Many victims of domestic violence experience serious ethical or religious dilemmas about ending a marriage. Marriage, as discussed earlier, is sanctified in many religious and spiritual traditions throughout the world and is considered by many spiritual traditions to be a cornerstone to social and religious life. Victims of domestic violence may experience many pressures to maintain this kind of relationship, even if it is not based on mutual love and respect. For some women, it is implicit that separating from their partner also means separating from their religious community because of the emphasis placed on maintaining a committed relationship. Many women may also feel that ending the relationship is not an option based on their personal belief that they entered into the relationship as a life-long commitment to themselves and their partner. According to a recent study of Muslim American women's experiences with abuse, for example, study participants lived with abuse for many years and hoped through faith that things would eventually improve, as marriage is an integral part of their religious and social life (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001).

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Many batterers use divorce, or the legal dissolution of a heterosexual marriage, as a powerful tool to manipulate their partners. Muslim batterers, for example, may convince their partners that only the husband may ask for divorce and that a husband may obtain a divorce without any type of legal representation or documentation, contrary to Islamic law, but permitted in some countries.*

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* Divorce in Islam is not as capricious as may be perceived and practiced. Khan (1980) explains, "the process of divorce is spread over a period, during which every effort must be made at smoothing out differences and at reconciliation. If differences become acute, the counsel and help of mediators, one from the wife's people and one from the husband's people, should be sought."

Yet, according to the Qur'an, a Muslim woman has the right to ask for a divorce if she fears cruelty or desertion on the part of her husband (Sultan, 2002). "...But if you fear they cannot observe the limits prescribed by Allah, then it shall be no sin for either of them in what she gives to get her freedom..." (Qur'an 2:230). Some Muslim women, however, may hesitate to divorce due to the heavy emphasis placed on the social importance of marriage in many Muslim communities and the fear that they will displease God or their families, even if the relationship is life threatening (Faizi, 2000). But both the Muslim and the Jewish faiths have always recognized divorce, although it is viewed as a last resort, when all other attempts to restore the relationship have failed and it is determined that the continuation of the relationship is considered to be detrimental to the wellbeing of either party.

Similarly, for Christian women, the promise of "'til death do us part" is commonly interpreted to mean that marriage is permanent, even if abuse is present in the relationship (Fortune, 1991). According to Reverend Fortune, mutual respect is a necessary element of a life-long commitment between two people and violence in a life-long relationship transgresses the commitment and fractures the relationship. By seeking safety through a permanent separation from her partner, the victim is acknowledging that the commitment she and her partner made to each other no longer exists, but she is not the one breaking the commitment (Eilts, 1995); rather, it is the abusive behavior that violates the commitment.

CONCLUSION

A batterer may choose to manipulate his partner's religion and faith as a means to reinforce and maintain power and control over that partner. In fact, many religious communities have made public statements denouncing domestic violence and the use of religious teachings to justify it. The unique role that faith leaders and other community members hold in protecting and nurturing the spiritual well-being of their whole community carries the added responsibility to also protect and nurture the safety of individual members. This requires intensive efforts to not only acknowledge domestic violence within their communities but also ongoing education about the issues and the commitment to create appropriate responses that support victims and survivors. Information on developing faith-based responses to domestic violence will be discussed in further detail in the *Religion and Domestic Violence: Developing a Collaborative Response* packet.

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Additional information on religion/spirituality and domestic violence issues are available through the FaithTrust Institute (telephone: 206-634-1903, fax: 206-634-0115 and email: info@faithtrustinstitute.org*) and the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute (telephone: 770-909-0715, fax: 770-907-4069, and email:* bcdvorg@aol.com).

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