Anya Watson

3/7/17

For my presentation, my main question was if Muslim women “need saving.” I researched if Islam as a religion is inherently oppressive to women, and if Islamic societies are oppressive to women as well. I looked at both Islamic societies in the United States but also at other countries, specifically Muslim majority countries. It was difficult because my topic had so much overlap with people that presented before me that I had to change my presentation after each class. I originally was also going to address honor killings and domestic violence in my presentation as well, but someone else already talked extensively about how domestic violence is no more prevalent in Muslim relationships than in relationships where the couple is of a different religion. People also talked a lot about Muslim women in the United States, so to try to make my presentation more interesting I included perspectives from other countries as well. I found that the questions I had are very complex as they generalize all Muslim women and there are so many factors that go into whether Muslim women need saving. However, by the end of my research it was clear to me that Islam as a religion is not inherently oppressive to women. With Islamic societies, it is a much more multifaceted issue. It is completely situational and based on the society, the political climate of the society, and the culture of the society that is being looked at. As for what the Quran says, it does have some verses that could be interpreted as oppressive to women, but only when taken out of context. Furthermore, many other religious texts like the Bible have similar passages but these are overlooked because Christianity is not seen as a threat like Islam is in the West.

I specifically chose three topics to research: headscarves, arranged marriages, and polygamy. These are topics which many people use when supporting the argument that Muslim women are oppressed and need saving. The idea that women have to cover up (supposedly for men), that they cannot choose their husbands, and that Islam endorses the practice of polygamy are all misconceptions that many people have. I wanted to research this because as a woman and a feminist, I am very interested in the treatment of other women. We had also touched on it in class, and I wanted to dig deeper. With headscarves, I found that it is not a requirement of Islam, rather Islam encourages modesty for both men and women. It is in fact a personal choice. On the flip side, in many Islamic societies, especially in Muslim majority countries in the Middle East and Africa, it can be dangerous for a woman to go out uncovered. As for arranged marriages, often people confuse it with forced marriages. In Islam, arranged marriages must be approved by both the bride and groom, and to force anyone to marry someone they do not want is considered a grave sin. For some women, arranged marriages can be very beneficial, which shows that it is not oppressive practice. They can help because women can marry into a wealthier or more educated family. Although unfortunately, forced marriages do still happen in Islam, it is not exclusive to Islam as it happens with Hindus and Sikhs too. With polygamy, there is a verse in the Quran that approves polygamy (specifically polygyny), but it is important to look at the historical context of this part of the Quran. This verse (or ayah) in the Quran was revealed shortly after the Battle of Uhud in the year 625 in which many Muslim men were killed by Meccans, so there were many widows, some of who had children and needed support. The ayah even specifically says that the man can only take multiple wives if he can provide for them all. Polygamy is now illegal in the United States, but it is still practiced in other parts of the world.

I used many sources for my research, from books and articles to peer reviewed journals and blogs on the internet (for gathering opinions). One book I read was called “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?” by Lila Abu-Lughod. The entire book was available to me online through the UW library website. These sources are what shaped my argument and presentation.

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