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The Pedophile Prophet? Breathing a Culturally Relative Point of View into a Controversial Cultural Debate

Samuel S. Thompson
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

This work focuses on a controversial topic within women studies of the Islamic world, the very young marriage of Mohammad's second wife Aisha. The work attempts to meet the issue on level ground and explain that while this may seem as a spark on conflict between non-Muslim cultures and the Islamic world this marriage was not altogether that uncommon for the time.

Keywords

Islam, Mohammad, Aisha Culture, Anthropology

Disciplines

Anthropology | Gender and Sexuality | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Religion | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology of Religion

Comments

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The Pedophile Prophet?
Breathing a Culturally Relative Point of View into a Controversial Cultural Debate

by Samuel Thompson

Across our world there is an ongoing debate as to how two global powers can coexist peacefully. This conflict I am referring to is the culture clash between the Muslim World and Western Civilization, made famous by Samuel Huntington (1996). One of the more sensitive centers of conflict that has made itself apparent is the West's misunderstanding or blatant disrespect of the Islamic prophet Mohammed. The specific aspect of this growing source of conflict I intend to focus on in this chapter is the misrepresentation of Mohammed's marriage to his young wife Aisha. The general synopsis of the conflict is that the West sees the fact of Mohammed marrying a young teen as an act of pedophilia, whereas the Islamic world sees this understanding of their Prophet as sacrilegious and disgraceful.

To hopefully clarify some confusion about this chapter's title, in no way am I arguing that the Prophet Mohammed was indeed a pedophile. That being said, I will also not withhold historical facts to persuade anyone that Mohammed was in fact not a pedophile. All I wish to accomplish within this chapter is to bring a culturally relative perspective to the debate of the appropriateness of Mohammed's marriage to Aisha. By providing this perspective, I hope that you, the reader, might be able to form a more educated opinion concerning this topic. Along with providing a new perspective, I hopefully will also be able to dispel some of the cultural knee-jerk reactions of outright disgust and replace those feelings with those of tolerance or at least understanding.

Discussing Mohammed's marriage to Aisha is important because many modern stereotypes have formed from Westerners hastily condemning the historical facts without taking

the proper measures to understand the issue on its own cultural and historical terms. That being said, the first few points I want to discuss involve giving a brief historical overview of the issue of Aisha's marriage. I will analyze this issue from a historical lens that covers Aisha's relationship with the Prophet and how Mohammed's previous marriages influenced his relationship with Aisha. This will then lead into the debate of when Aisha was married and for what reasons, particularly focusing on marriage's use as an alliance rather than an emotional or domestic relationship. After establishing a historical background to view this debate, I intend to compare Aisha's marriage to other common contemporary marriage practices within the early Islamic world to determine if her marriage was inappropriate. After discussing the marriage's appropriateness, or lack thereof, I hope to use examples of how important Aisha was to the Islamic religion to reargue the immediate assumption that Mohammed was a pedophile who simply valued Aisha as a sexual object.

To begin to understand Aisha's complicated relationship with the Prophet Mohammed, we must first understand the historical setting in more detail. The Islamic religion came into being during a time that Mohammed characterized as *jahiliyyah*, meaning "ignorance" in Arabic. This historical period was characterized mainly by what early Muslims considered to be the dominant ignorant mindsets of the peoples living in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. This jahiliyyah mindset caused countless acts of violence and spread terror throughout the semi-nomadic tribal culture of Arabia. During this time each tribe had its own code of chivalry called a *murawah* that determined how members of each Bedouin tribe should conduct themselves. In general each murawah was based on ideals of "courage, patience, endurance... to preserve the honor of the tribe" (Armstrong 2006:12). While many during the jahiliyyah period believed these to be admirable morals, Mohammed recognized the murawah's practical limitations. While

many of these traits appear to be admirable in theory, in practice the ideals of muruwah did not extend to people outside of one's immediate tribe. This partial morality created a strongly factional society of different tribes that upheld these moral principles to one another within their own tribe, but perpetuated cruelty and violence against those of different or unallied tribes (Hazleton 2013).

There was no overarching idea of "human rights" that interconnected every human; only the preservation of the tribe's honor was paramount. The basic motto perpetuated by this tribal system was "help your brother whether he is being wronged or wronging others" (Armstrong 2006: 14). This cultural system thus created a very strict clan-based society in which groups used structured violence against one another as a viable method of survival. By recognizing the need for change in this society, Mohammed gradually realized that he could not simply reform Arabic culture as a whole without making many enemies or gaining powerful allies. Mohammed's recognition that in order to fully integrate his Islamic beliefs into a society he must form a completely new social group of believers, led to the creation of the earliest Islamic community. However, it would not be enough to simply form this group of believers but it must also be protected politically and militarily. This would prove to be accomplished by Mohammed through creating strong political, financial and military alliances (Armstrong 2006). At the time, marriage was the easiest and most steadfast method to creating these essential alliances. In understanding the importance of marriage as more of a forged alliance rather than that of a sexual attraction, we can gain a more historically relative perspective to the reasoning behind why Mohammed married the women he did.

Mohammed's first marriage was to a distant relative: a recently widowed, wealthy business woman named Khadijah. Many early Islamic scholars insist that Mohammed's marriage

to Khadijah was indeed a marriage born out of respect and love, as well as opportunity. Mohammed lost his mother at a very early age, and many early Islamic scholars believe that this trauma caused Mohammed, on some primal level, to seek motherly support from his marriage to Khadijah (Armstrong 2006). This motherly aspect to Mohammed's relationship with Khadijah eventually developed an element of stewardship. Khadijah provided much needed mental and financial support to an otherwise talented, poor man trapped in a culture that pressed those without means into a cycle of misfortune. In fact, before Khadijah proposed to Mohammed, he had asked for his cousin Fakhitah's hand in marriage, but his offer was rebuked because he could not financially support the lifestyle to which she was accustomed (Armstrong 2006). The fact that Mohammed could not afford a wife who was unable to support herself financially showed that financial and political connections, often made through marriage, made all the difference in successfully attaining and maintaining power.

While marriage was often a lucrative method to attaining political and cultural capital, it also acted as an important spiritual catalyst for Mohammed. As I mentioned before, Khadijah not only supported Mohammed politically and financially but also encouraged him to strive for his image of a dominant Islamic religion; she was even the first to speak the *shahada* (a ritualized oath through which its speaker confess obedience and acceptance of Allah as the one and only God and Mohammed as Allah's messenger) and convert to Islam (Hazleton 2013). While Mohammed's first marriage might not seem to be overtly crucial in shaping his controversial relationship with Aisha, I would argue that in fact the influence and impact that Khadijah had on Mohammed as a young man greatly influenced the entire course of Mohammed's formation of his Islamic religion and thus his subsequent marriage to Aisha. Not only is analyzing Khadijah's marriage to Mohammed imperative to understanding Mohammed's relationship with Aisha, but

Mohammed's first marriage also highlights the great importance of marriage in forming new alliances or strengthening loose relationships into unwavering alliances. Without Khadijah's financial and mental support, it is doubtful that Mohammed would have been an effective prophet (Hazleton 2013).

Now that I have briefly discussed the different historical purposes marriage had in early Islamic history and the impact that Mohammed's first marriage to Khadijah had on his future relationships, I want to delve into the debate at hand. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, I will do my best not to misrepresent the historical facts. While there are several different recordings of Aisha's age when she was betrothed and subsequently married to Mohammed, the consensus is that Aisha was around six when she was first betrothed to Mohammed and seven to nine years old when she was officially married to the Prophet (Spellberg 1994). However, Mohammed did not immediately consummate the marriage during his wedding night. This particular detail about Mohammed and Aisha's marriage, as well as when Mohammed did indeed consummate the marriage, were both very explicitly recorded by several early Islamic scholars, almost as if the scholars predicted the very controversy this chapter discusses. Mohammed was said to have "consummated" his union with Aisha when she permanently moved into his home, after living separately for several years. It should also be noted that there was no clear definition to what "consummation" was in this case, but Mohammed was recorded to have waited "until Aisha had reached puberty" to consummate the marriage (Armstrong 2006: 93).

The relatively large amount of time that Mohammed took to consummate the marriage, while not the modern perception of the acceptable age of marriage, does display Mohammed's recognition of Aisha's relative immaturity and displays a sense of honor that a "pedophile" would lack (Spellberg 1994). This sense of honor that Mohammed shows toward his relationship

with Aisha not only attests to his tremendous sense of morality but also introduces an even more important element to the relationship between the two. Based on Mohammed's altered behavior due to Aisha's age, we can infer that the marital relationship between Aisha and Mohammed was characteristically different from normal marital relationships of the time. In fact, I believe that much of how Mohammed characterized his initial relationship with Aisha was based on his previous life experiences in his first marriage to Khadijah. One such example from Mohammed's marriage to Khadijah was his compassion towards children and acting as a father and mentor for them. This is evident by his love and acceptance of his adopted sons: Zayd ibn al-Harith and his cousin Ali (Hazleton 2013).

Zayd was a slave gifted to Mohammed by his first wife Khadijah; but, when Zayd's family came to ransom him back, Zayd begged to stay with Mohammed. Mohammed was so touched by the boy's affection that he decided to free Zayd and adopt him. Similarly Mohammed adopted Ali, the son of Abu Talib, Mohammed's uncle and surrogate father. After Abu Talib had fallen under considerable financial constraint, Mohammed gladly adopted Ali to ease his uncle's troubles. Mohammed was recorded as caring for both of his adopted wards equally and "treat[ing] them as his own sons" (Armstrong 2006: 27). This overt love and compassion towards children in particular seems to show that, while Mohammed may have married Aisha, he did not forget that she was still a child. How could Mohammed, a man who cares so deeply for children, agree to enter a sexual relationship with a young girl the same way as he would a woman his own age? In fact, there is documented proof that Mohammed perceived his early relationship with Aisha to be that of a mentor or caretaker rather than a sexual partner: "he was sensitive to her situation, allowing her to still play with dolls and even joined her in play" (Roded 2006: 58).

Several different characteristics of Mohammed's marriage to Aisha indicate a different initial type of marital relationship, but it is also imperative to emphasize the strategy behind their relationship. While there was a strong emotional component to Mohammed's relationship with Aisha, the marriage initially, like many other marriages at the time, began as a strategic alliance between Mohammed and his loyal friend and follower, Abu Bakr, the father of Aisha. Interestingly, marriage between two adults as a method to strengthen an alliance was almost less common than alliances formed by a marriage between an adult and a minor and many "[other women] were even younger than Aisha" at the time when they were being betrothed (Armstrong 2006: 93). To better understand why Mohammed's marriage to Aisha was such an important alliance, we must analyze the historical tension and conflicts between the growing Muslim minority and the tribal majority of Arabia.

The dominant tribe within the Arabic tribal system that controlled Mecca was actually Mohammed's own tribe, the Quraysh. However, recent opposition to Mohammed's teachings had escalated from mere annoyance to outright aggression. What sparked this drastic escalation of hostility was Mohammed's public denunciation of the traditional three Goddesses of the Haram. These were the most predominant and important deities to the Quraysh because the widespread worship of these deities allowed the Quraysh to profit greatly from pilgrimage and semi-annual markets. While the Quraysh did not approve of Mohammed disrespecting their goddesses and ancestral beliefs, they feared more of the economic and political implications that a religious shift would have. If Mohammed's Allah were accepted as the one and only God and the Goddesses were discredited to false idols, then Mecca's economy and authority would crumble. In an effort to preserve their power, the Quraysh felt it necessary to silence Mohammed by any means (Armstrong 2006).

Until the year 619 AD, Mohammed had been able to effectively protect himself from the majority of his tribe's wrath under the protection of his powerful and well-respected uncle, Abu Talib. However, this all changed during the "year of sadness," when his political protector Abu Talib passed away. While the successor to Abu Talib could not purposefully deny Mohammed protection, as this would be a sign of weakness, outward aggression to Mohammed and his followers only escalated. Soon Mohammed would undertake something never before seen in Arabia. Mohammed was all too aware of the rising anger within Mecca and instead of staying and potentially provoking an open conflict, Mohammed began making plans to move his Islamic community or *ummah* to the oasis region of Yathrib. Mohammed was approached during one of his annual Hajj pilgrimages by Arabs from a Yathrib tribe that wanted Mohammed to act as a mediator for two warring tribes within the oasis. Mohammed accepted under the condition that they provide him and his ummah sanctuary. The representatives of the oasis clans came back after one year and agreed to Mohammed's terms (Armstrong 2006; Hazleton 2013).

This migration that Mohammed had planned for his people was not a simple change of address. This *hijrah*, migration, marked the complete severing of his ummah from their traditional Meccan tribal affiliations. This denunciation of their tribal affiliation would effectively transform the ummah from a band of loosely-related religious groups, comprising many different tribes, into a singular Islamic tribe of principle, not blood. This severance only highlights the precariousness of Mohammed's situation. Severing tribal connections left anyone, no matter how powerful, open to attack. This uncertainty regarding the ummah's future is one of the prime reasons that Mohammed formally moved in and married Aisha when he did. After narrowly escaping an assassination attempt with Abu Bakr, Mohammed departed for Quba: the nearest city within Yathrib. When Mohammed and Abu Bakr finally arrived to sanctuary,

Mohammed immediately sought to set an example for his ummah and strengthen tribal ties with his friend Abu Bakr. The moment his house was constructed in 623, Aisha, who had previously been betrothed to Mohammed, officially moved into his house as his third wife (Armstrong 2006; Spellberg 1994). The necessity to strengthen internal alliances within the ummah was a key factor in the perseverance of the Islamic faith; Aisha's marriage to Mohammed was merely a product of that necessity, not the sexual fantasy of an older man.

It is apparent that analyzing the historical circumstances in which the ummah came into power is crucial to better understanding the reasons behind Aisha's marriage to Mohammed. The past is often a great place to start when trying to understand why something came to be, but the contemporary impact that Aisha had on the shaping of the Islamic faith is also, I feel, very important in demonstrating that her role was much more than that of a sexual fantasy of a powerful man. The paramount influences Aisha had on the Islamic faith that best demonstrate her importance on a larger religious/political scope include her compilation of the Hadith, influence on the original ummah, and relation to the first Caliph (Spellberg 1994).

The largest and arguably most important impact that Aisha had on the Islamic faith was her compilation of the *Hadith*, or recorded sayings of or lessons from the Prophet (Spellberg 1994). The fact that Aisha spent the majority of her life dedicated to recording the stories and parables she had acquired over her lifetime regarding the Prophet is remarkable. But Aisha's interpretation and nuance she placed on these oral traditions is almost as important as, if not more important than, the actual Hadith compilation. Based on many of Aisha's Hadiths, it appears she was actually one of the earliest Islamic feminists (Kahf 2000). Aisha accomplishes this by not only interpreting issues within early Islam as distinctly feminist issues, but also consistently "disput[ing] men's interpretation of the faith" (Kahf 2000: 159). One of Aisha's

prominent examples of her rebuke of Muslim men is within her *Story of the Eleven Women*. In this text Aisha describes different suitors approaching a woman with offers of marriage. The woman rejects all those who would normally be good choices because of their closeness to the Prophet, but instead she accepts and marries a “son of a daughter of Hadrami” or a southern Arab. This Hadith is particularly important because a southern Arab would normally not be the best suitor compared to the other men, but Aisha stresses the reasons for the woman’s choice being based on mutual attraction (Kahf 2000). This shows that Aisha promoted a different outlook on reviewing marriage proposals; instead of adhering to materialist, traditional values, marriage should instead be based on companionship.

Aisha’s continuous questioning of a male-centric interpretation of Islam and perpetuation of a feminist interpretation within her Hadith is why Aisha was important in regards to her enormous impact on recording and editing of Islamic texts. However, Aisha’s overall importance extended much farther than influencing the historical religious texts of Islam. Aisha was also influential within the actual political system of the original ummah. Aisha was observed to be Mohammed’s favorite of his nine wives during his life and, as such, was considered more influential regarding many political and cultural issues during the time (Spellberg 1994). All throughout recorded events during Mohammed’s life, Aisha would bring up debates for discussion, including how Mohammed’s revelations seemed to benefit certain groups more than others (mainly men over women) but also counselling Mohammed on behalf of others of the Islamic community. Acting as a connection between the Islamic community to its leading religious figure elevated Aisha to a cultural status few have ever achieved in the Islamic world (Kahf 2000). Even after Mohammed’s death, Aisha was a predominant member of the Islamic community who held a powerful and prestigious status few other contemporary figures had.

Most obvious was that the first successor to Mohammed after his death was Aisha's father, Abu Bakr (Spellberg 1994).

Mohammed was a fascinating and complicated historical figure, whose actions and beliefs still hold relevance over one thousand years later. The influence that Mohammed has on modern international issues is the predominant reason for his life being scrutinized so thoroughly by modern scholars. However, in our modern-day attempt to persuade the masses or discredit different religious factions, we as Western society have lost a historical and culturally relative perspective on Mohammed's actions and beliefs. While he may be the proclaimed Prophet of God, he was also a man who was nevertheless impacted and shaped by the Islamic community and culture from which he came. Losing this perspective on Mohammed leaves us vulnerable to presentist bias, or evaluating historical events or people by modern values or norms. If Aisha's role in early Islam was limited to that of feeding a sexual fantasy of the Prophet, why would she be so revered by those during her own time? Why would she be allowed to play such an important role in the shaping of the Islamic faith? Obviously this evidence points us to the conclusion that she was indeed much more than a sexual outlet, but rather an irreplaceable historical figure within early Islamic culture.

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