In the introduction to their important new book, Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home, the editors, CBE founder Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Barbara Fisher-Townsend, underscore the tensions raised when abuse is uncovered in Christian quarters:

Honest investigation disclosed that the rate of abuse among Christians was no less than that in the general population—even though it was often cleverly concealed. The insidious evil lurked in all denominational and non-denominational groups, in all ethnic and racial groups, in all socio-economic and political groups; and yet its very presence was so often denied, minimized, or ignored by the church of Jesus Christ. . . . Our theology of the family, sometimes based upon the dictates of self-styled gurus rather than upon the actual biblical precepts, raised a multitude of questions. How could a bruised and battered wife be likened to the bride of Christ? What would happen to the reputation of the church if news got out of violence within a member’s family? How could an endangered victim be placed in a safe location if that meant separating a married couple? Without violating the mandates of Scripture, could a survivor be provided with food, shelter, monetary assistance, or prayer support?2

When reality clashes with Christian ideals and, often, particularly, with our self-image as Christ’s faithful church predicated upon those ideals, we are shaken. We question our ability to self-perceive, and our sense of wellbeing within God’s approval is threatened. How can such evil occur in lives we are convinced have been committed to the gentle Christ we claim to serve?

A similar tension can be perceived within Islam. In the November 2008 issue of Christianity Today, senior analyst and executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, Dalia Mogahed, reported:

Muslim women and men, surprisingly, hold similar views about Shari’ah. In Jordan, most Muslim women and men say it should play a role in legislation. Muslim women want and think they deserve equal rights: the right to vote without interference from their families, the right to work at any job they are qualified for, and even the right to serve in senior levels of government. In short, Muslim women don’t regard Shari’ah as impeding their rights; they may in fact see it as a road to progress. . . . Our research in Iraq shows 83 percent of Iraqi women say they do not want a division between state and religion, and most want religious leaders to take a part in family law.2

However, not everyone living under Shari’ah is so enthusiastic. Roya Hakakian in her book Journey from the Land of No well remembers the levying of Shari‘ah:

We were the first generation ever to be frisked at the school gates every morning by peer volunteers who called themselves “Members of the Islamic Society,” an arm of the SA-VAMA, the new secret police stationed in schools. Rosy-faced students waited in line to have their cheeks rubbed to ensure their blush was natural. Girls with long eyelashes had to pull at them to prove they were real. Those with books other than school texts were interrogated, their books confiscated. . . . We were in exile in our own city. We were girls, living in a female ghetto. Instead of yellow armbands, we wore the sign of our inferiority on our heads. We switched sidewalks when we saw...
men approaching. Beaches, family parks, movie theaters had all been segregated. In the back of every bus, a sign read: SISTERS MUST SIT ONLY IN THIS AREA!³

One classmate who complained by writing an essay of protest in a school class was imprisoned, branded with a hot iron, and subjected to other forms of violent emotional and physical abuse.⁴ Again, the ideal and the reality can be in disturbing tension.

Confucianism is known to value monogamous marriage, seeing it as “the rule . . . both as to union with but one wife and as to permanence of marriage.”⁵ But, Mencius taught that within that monogamy the wife was to be placed in subjection, being warned by her mother, “You are going to your home. You must be respectful. You must be careful. Do not disobey your husband!”⁶ There, she must contend with the double standard of her husband holding concubines, often her younger sister,⁷ the charge not to remarry if her husband dies,⁸ and shame if she divorces and remarries.⁹ She herself could face divorce by her husband for “disobedience to parents-in-law, failure to bear a son, adultery, jealousy of her husband, leprosy, garrulity, theft.” But, should she herself initiate divorce, her “husband and his father or elder brother are sole and final judges,” determining whether he divorces her, or whether he and his father (or elder brother) grant their “consent” for her to divorce him.¹⁰ Despite the Doctrine of the Mean’s ideal of “perfect contentment,” wherein “a happy union with wife and children is like the music of lutes and harps!” tension is built into a relationship where a man is admonished, “thus may you regulate your contentment, wherein a happy union with family and enjoy the delights of wife and children!”¹¹ A union under domination of one party, as marriage was in Confucianism, led to a variety of abuses from foot-binding of children to punishment of non-complying spouses.

In this issue, we look at the plight of women caught in the tension between what is wholesome, life-affirming, and mutually beneficial in faith in conflict with more repressive teaching and its sometimes abusive results. Our focus, of course, is on the Christian involvement in this dilemma, including the compounded problems occurring when Christian leaders are influenced by patriarchal ideas within Islamic and Confucian philosophy and practice that reinforce repressive tendencies toward women.

Talbot School of Theology Professor Sheryl Takagi Silzer of Wycliffe Bible Translators begins with a poignant memoir of fifty years of struggle to free her Christian faith from the negative impact of her Confucian background. A scholar who remains anonymous follows with a thought-provoking discussion of the impact on Christian identity of Islamic attitudes and their potentially deleterious effect on women in the Christian church. I contribute an interview with two Christians from India, highlighting the contrast they have seen between Christian freedom for women and more restrictive Muslim attitudes in countries in which they have lived, worked, and ministered. Professor Alan Johnson of Wheaton College and Graduate School, longtime champion of women in ministry, expertly examines the “demise” of patriarchy in the New Testament, underscoring once more the Christian need to continue to build on freedom of Christ and not slip back into the attitude that Jesus abhorred, wherein we “lord” (kuriaēō) it over one another (Luke 22:24–27). An accomplished poet who is new to our pages but familiar to many others, H. Edgar Hix, gives us three outstanding poems. The first treats our theme of the clash of religious ideals and practice, and the next two celebrate a Christian woman who impacted his life with her righteous use of leadership. Finally, we offer two perceptive book reviews: the first by an expert in addressing abuse, Professor Steven Tracy of Phoenix Seminary; and the second by Bethel College Assistant Professor Elizabeth McLaughlin.

Our hope for this issue is that it encourage all of us to continue to hold the unifying of our faith and practice under close scrutiny, each of us striving to be as consistently just and loving as the pure “Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of change” (Jas. 1:17).

Blessings,

Bill

Notes

6. Li Ki 3.2.2.2, Dawson, The Basic Teachings of Confucius, 143.
8. According to the Li Ki (10.3.7), cited in Dawson, The Basic Teachings of Confucius, 146.
11. According to The Doctrine of the Mean (152–3), cited in Dawson, The Basic Teachings of Confucius, 139.

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