



Two Prominent Sheikhs Speak Out on Women Rights and Freedom of Expression

Two prominent Saudi sheikhs, *Al-Qarni* and *Al-Awdah*, spoke out in defense of the rights of Arab women this week. *Al-Qarni*'s condemned the abuse of women in an open letter two days ago in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper. Then last night, during a forum, "Youth and Globalization", on modernity and change, *Al-Awdah* discussed Muslim women living in the West and warned of the danger of what he termed "closed door" policies in the Arab world.

Sheikh 'A'id al-Qarni



In his open letter entitled "**A Woman is calling...Is there a responder?**", Sheikh *Al-Qarni* lashed out against the despotic abusive male dominance in Saudi Arabia. He began by stating that gainful employment by women has led to extortion and subjugation by tyrannical oppressive husbands, harsh and surly fathers or dogmatic and disobedient brothers.

Addressing what seems to be a systemic problem in the Kingdom, *Al-Qarni* recounts in detail how working women have been exploited by fathers and brothers who rob them of their salaries and forbid them from marrying¹ in order to perpetuate the financial extortion, and how thousands of women have been divorced for refusing to give their husbands their inheritance or their salaries. *Al-Qarni* also explained how such women are subjected to physical and emotional abuse as if "a product for sale or a for-profit business." He criticizes the judicial system as well for its inadequate protection of women and its intentionally slow bureaucracy and unwillingness to take any action against male family members. He stresses that these are not isolated incidences, stating that he could write volumes detailing stories showing the subjugation of women and the injustice they suffer.

Al-Qarni demanded that the authorities establish a committee to look into these cases. Before considering the establishment of committees to advocate compassion for animals, he said, let us establish committees for human compassion. In unusually strong terms, he argued that "these scoundrels" must first be advised and encouraged to change their behavior and, if they do not, the state must physically discipline these men and incarcerate them until the authorities extract from them a binding written pledge to behave. "By God, the authorities must deter those who are unwilling to be restrained by the Quran," he exclaimed. *Al-Qarni* then closed his letter with two verses of poetry – the most powerful form of Arab expression:

*"If injustice spreads and tyranny prevails – and the earthly judge shows bias in judgment
Woe, then woe, then woe – to the earthly judge from the heavenly one."*

PI Online notes that, as of late, *Al-Qarni*'s writing in general has become more concerned with human conditions in society than rhetorical religious dicta. By his own admission in other articles, his recent trips to Europe (for medical reasons) seem to have contributed to his change in focus. It appears as though he was genuinely surprised by the openness of the society and the kindness of the Westerners he encountered and began to question the wisdom of those who would have his homeland remain closed and austere.

Source: Al-Sharq al-Awsat – 'A'id al-Qarni – Date: 2/26/2008
<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=17&issueno=10682&article=460167&feature=1>

¹ A woman in Saudi Arabia must always have a male protector who is in charge of her under the law and the father or the brother must provide his consent in order for her to marry.

Sheikh *Salman al-'Awdah*



Addressing the forum, Sheikh *Salman Al-Awdah* warned against the politics of “closing doors and windows” on all that is new and explained that true Islamic thinking does not reject newness. He also stressed the concept of self-censure by all members of society in order to benefit from this openness to the world while distinguishing right from wrong.

Responding to a question by a woman in the audience about Muslim women in western societies wearing the veil, *Al-Awdah* took a philosophical approach, stating that the Muslim nature must be flexible and capable of keeping in step with the latest developments of the time. He emphasized that his preference would be for Muslims to wear the same kind of clothes worn by the majority of the population of the country he/she is visiting in order to better integrate with the society without attracting undue attention. He also confirmed that this approach applies to women who can continue to exercise due diligence and dress conservatively while adopting the prevalent style of dress in the country.

Al-'Awdah stressed the importance of presenting Islam as a global religion rather than strictly an Arab one. He also stated that it is unrealistic to attempt to force Muslim converts in the West to adopt Arab traditions. A person can accept true Islam while maintaining the Western customs in which he or she was raised. He concluded that, if a person converts to Islam and continues to consume alcohol or remains uncircumcised, it is still a better outcome than if this person did not convert at all.

Al-'Awdah obviously intends to make Islam a less intimidating and menacing religion in the eyes of the West. Although his objective in doing so may be to attract converts, he also seems to be contributing to a more harmonious relationship between Islam and the West and to more liberal positions towards women and men alike. His intentions will undoubtedly be treated with suspicion by liberals and will be resisted by conservatives. Nevertheless, [PI Online](#) believes that his ideas will make a positive contribution toward improving the status of women in Islam and that he brings a moderate voice to the debate about freedom of expression once dominated by radical conservatives.

It is still unclear at this point, whether these two events are part of a concerted effort by the Saudi religious establishment to change in attitude towards women, or simply two established religious scholars becoming more liberal; time will tell.

Source: Alwatan – Salman al-'Awdah [reporter: Mona al-Shahri] – Date 2/28/2008
<http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=2708&id=43989>

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