

5. RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN ABUSED BY SPOUSES

“It’s right here in the Bible, in black and white, Ephesians, 5:22-3: ‘For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.’”

“The Prophet Muhammad says men have rights over their wives. You have to do what I tell you.”

“It’s the obligation of a Jewish wife to create Shalom Bayit” (a peaceful family).

If your husband makes a statement like one of those above, you could be intimidated into thinking he must be right. Honest believers can of course disagree about interpretations of religious texts. But an abusive man married to an observant woman will take words out of their context to deliberately distort their meaning. If your religious beliefs are important to you, and you are involved with an abusive person he will probably use those beliefs to try to undermine your confidence. He might do that whether or not his religious orientation is the same as yours. Your responses to the questions below will give you a good idea of whether he is using your religion as a form of abuse and control. You can probably add to the list from your own experience. To evaluate whether your partner is using your religion to abuse you, check each item below that applies.

Does Your Husband or Intimate Partner:

1. tell you not to read religious texts because he is the only one who knows the correct interpretation? Does he strip phrases or words from their context to give them a different meaning?
2. interfere with your religious observance by “interpreting” what sources say about what you should wear or eat or when to fast?
3. claim a religious source says you must obey your husband, no matter what?
4. say doctrine requires you alone to perform all household tasks?
5. claim that a particular text requires you to provide him with sexual gratification regardless of your own feeling? Violate your understanding of religious proscriptions about purity? Touch you in ways or circumstances that you believe are wrong?
6. say a peaceful family is exclusively your job and family conflict is your fault?
8. keep you from spending time with people at your religious group or with certain people there?
9. move the family to a different congregation when community members realize he is abusing you?

If you put a check beside many of the questions above, you may wonder whether you have misunderstood your religious obligations. Many of the questions exemplify the promotion of the idea that a woman must comply with her husband’s wishes. Obedience is a very close cousin of control. Control over your actions, speech and even your thoughts is what an abusive husband wants. The easiest way to accomplish that is by manipulating your thoughts and feelings. After a while you may begin to believe his interpretations are correct and that they indicate you are not a good devout wife.

Religious Leaders Change

Nations, cultures, individuals – and religions – change at dizzying rates. That can be unsettling if you rely on the stability of religious beliefs and traditional family and cultural practices to guide you along a predictable path. Now many religious leaders recognize that the incidence of battering among congregates is pretty much the same as in the rest of society. They are inclined to believe the women who tell them their husbands abuse them. They are familiar with religious texts that prohibit abuse. There is some evidence that an increasing number of abuse victims and perpetrators seek help from religious leaders. So long as those religious leaders encourage women to seek expert advice from domestic violence shelter and crisis line advocates and so long as they hold perpetrators accountable, they will make important contributions to the safety of battered women.

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