

Challenging the Stereotypes of Fundamentalism: An Islamic Feminist Perspective

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Since 1974, I have been engaged in developing the discipline of feminist theology in the context of Islam. The aim of my paper is to present a scholarly examination of the theological assumptions underlying the negative attitudes toward women that are widespread in Muslim culture, such examination to be done from a feminist or non-patriarchal perspective. My contention is that understanding these theological assumptions is essential in the effort to establish gender-justice or woman-man equality, which, in turn, is a pre-condition for development and peace both in the Muslim world and in the world in general. First, a few words about how I became involved in this endeavor, which has become central to my life-journey.

Background of My Work in the Area of the Theology of Woman in Islam

I have always known what it means to be a Muslim woman. I was born female in a Saiyyad¹ Muslim family living in Lahore, an historic Muslim city in Pakistan, a country created in the name of Islam. It was not until the fall of 1974, however, that I began my career as a “feminist” theologian — almost by accident and rather reluctantly. At that time, I was faculty adviser to the Muslim Students’ Association chapter at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. This “honor” had been conferred upon me solely by virtue of the fact that each student association was required to have a faculty adviser, and I happened to be the only Muslim faculty member on

campus that year. The officers of the M.S.A. chapter at Stillwater had established the tradition of having an annual seminar, at which one of the principal addresses was given by the faculty adviser. In keeping with this tradition, I was asked, albeit not with overwhelming enthusiasm, if I would read a paper on women in Islam at the seminar, which was to be held later that year.

I was aware that faculty advisers were not typically assigned to address specific subjects. I, however, was asked to speak about women in Islam at a seminar in which, incidentally, Muslim women were not allowed to participate or even attend. This was because, in the opinion of most chapter members, it would have been totally inappropriate to expect a Muslim woman, even one who taught them Islamic Studies, to be competent to speak on any other subject pertaining to Islam. I resented what the assigning of a subject meant. Furthermore, until that time, I had not been interested in the subject of women in Islam. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation for two reasons. First, I knew that being invited to address an all-male, largely Arab Muslim group which prided itself on its patriarchalism was itself a breakthrough. Second, I was so tired of hearing Muslim men pontificate on the position or status or role of women in Islam, while it was totally inconceivable that any woman would presume to speak about the position or status or role of men in Islam. Considering the fact that there were hundreds of publications — books, articles, brochures, etc. — on the subject of women in Islam, virtually all of them by Muslim men, it was rather strange that there was not a single publication on the subject of the position or status or role of men in Islam! Perhaps this meant that men had no position or status or role in Islam! I understand that some publications of this sort are starting to appear. At any rate, I hope, one day, to help fill this gap as a return of courtesy to Muslim men who have spent so much time and energy defining women's place in Islam!

I do not know exactly when my "academic" study of women in Islam became a passionate quest for truth and justice on behalf of Muslim women. It began, perhaps, when I came to understand the impact so-called Islamic ideas and attitudes regarding women had had on my own life. What began as a scholarly exercise became an Odyssean venture in self-understanding. But "enlightenment" does not always lead to "endless bliss." The more I saw the justice and compassion of God reflected in the Qur'anic teachings regarding women, the more anguished and angry I became seeing the injustice and inhumanity to which Muslim women in general are subjected in actual life. I began to feel strongly that it was my duty, as a part of the microscopic minority of educated Muslim women, to

do as much consciousness-raising regarding the situation of Muslim women as I could. The journey which began in Stillwater has been a long and arduous one.

In early Islam, women such as the Prophet's wives Khadijah and ʿĀ'ishah, and the notable woman mystic Rabi'ā of Baṣra, figure significantly. Nonetheless, by and large the Islamic tradition has been and remains strongly patriarchal. This means, among other things, that the sources on which Islamic tradition is based, namely the Qur'ān (which Muslims believe to be God's Word transmitted through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muḥammad), the *Sunnab* (the practice of the Prophet Muḥammad), *Ḥadīth* (the oral traditions attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad), and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated for themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women. It is hardly surprising that, until now, the majority of Muslim women, who have been kept for centuries in physical, mental, and emotional bondage, have accepted this situation passively. It needs to be mentioned here that while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those in rural areas where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world.

Women and the Process of "Islamization" in the Contemporary Muslim World

In recent years, due largely to the pressure created by anti-women laws promulgated under the rubric of "Islamization" in some parts of the Muslim world, women with some degree of education and awareness are beginning to realize that religion has been and continues to be used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation. To understand the powerful impetus to "Islamize" Muslim societies, especially with regard to women-related norms and values, it is necessary to know that of all the challenges confronting the Muslim world, perhaps the greatest is that of modernity. Muslims, in general, tend to think of "modernity" in two ways: (a) as modernization which is associated with science, technology and material progress, and (b) as Westernization which is associated with promiscuity and all kinds of social problems ranging from latch-key kids to drug and alcohol abuse. While "modernization" is considered highly desirable, "Westernization" is considered equally undesirable.

What is important to note here is that an emancipated Muslim woman is seen by many Muslims as a symbol not of "modernization" but of "West-

ernization." These days, Muslims girls as well as boys go to Western institutions for higher education. When a young man returns from the West, he is considered "modernized," but when a young girl returns, she is considered "Westernized." This is so because she appears to be in violation of what traditional Muslim societies consider to be a necessary barrier between "private space," where women belong, and "public space," which belongs to men. The presence of women in men's space is considered to be highly dangerous. As a popular tradition states, whenever a man and a woman are alone, ash-Shayṭān (the devil) is bound to be there.² In today's Muslim world, due to the pressures of political and socio-economic realities, a significant number of women may be seen in "public space." Caretakers of Muslim traditionalism feel gravely threatened by this phenomenon. They see "emancipated" Muslim women as symbols of "Westernization," which is linked not only with the colonization of Muslim peoples by Western powers in the not-too-distant past, but also with the continuing onslaught on what they perceive to be "the integrity of the Islamic way of life" by Westerners and Westernized Muslims who uphold the West as a model for intellectual and social transformation of Muslim communities. They believe that it is necessary to put women back in their "space" (which also designates their "place") if "the integrity of the Islamic way of life" is to be preserved.

Although I began my study of theological issues pertaining to women in the Islamic tradition in 1974, it was not until 1983-84, when I spent almost two years in Pakistan, that my career as an activist began. In 1979, what is called the "Ḥudūd Ordinance" was enacted, according to which women's testimony was declared to be inadmissible in "Ḥadd" crimes, including the crime of rape. This was accompanied by a wave of violence toward women and a deluge of anti-women literature which swept across the country. Many women in Pakistan were jolted out of their "dogmatic slumber" by the "Islamization" of the legal system, which saw the promulgation of laws such as the Ḥudūd Ordinance and the Law of Evidence (1984). These laws, as well as the threat of other discriminatory legislation (such as the Law of Qiṣāṣ and Diyāt or "blood-money"), reduced their status systematically, virtually mathematically, to less than that of men. It soon became apparent that forces of religious conservatism were determined to cut the value of women down to one-half or less that of men, and that this attitude stemmed from a deep-rooted desire to keep women in their place, which means secondary, subordinate and inferior to men.

I witnessed these developments with increasing alarm and anxiety, and I asked myself how it was possible for manifestly unjust laws to be imple-

mented in a country which professed a passionate commitment to both Islam and modernity. The answer to my question was so obvious that I was startled that it had not struck me before. Pakistani society (or any other Muslim society) could enact or accept laws which specified that women are less than men in fundamental ways because Muslims, in general, consider it a self-evident truth that women are *not* equal to men. Among the “arguments” used to overwhelm any proponent of gender equality, the following are perhaps the most popular: according to the Qur’ān, men are “*qawwāmūn*” (generally translated as “rulers” or “managers”) in relation to women; according to the Qur’ān, a man’s share in inheritance is twice that of a woman; according to the Qur’ān, the witness of one man is equal to that of two women; according to the Prophet, women are deficient both in prayer (due to menstruation) and in intellect (due to their legal witness counting for less than a man’s).

Since, in all probability, I was the only Muslim woman in the country who had been engaged in a study of women’s issues from a nonpatriarchal, theological perspective, I was approached numerous times by women leaders (including the members of the Pakistan Commission on the Status of Women, before whom I gave my testimony in May 1984) to state my findings and determine if they could be used to improve the situation of Pakistani women. I was urged by women activists who were mobilizing and leading women’s protests in a country under martial law to help them refute the arguments which were being used against them, on a case-by-case or point-by-point basis. Though I felt eager to help, I was not sure if the best strategy was simply to respond to each argument that was being used to deprive women of their human (as well as Islamic) rights. In my opinion, what had to be done first and foremost was to examine the theological ground in which all the anti-women arguments were rooted to see if, indeed, a case could be made for asserting that, from the point of view of normative Islam, men and women are *essentially* equal, despite biological and other differences.

Women in the Islamic Tradition: Three Foundational Theological Assumptions

As a result of further study and reflection, I came to realize that in the Islamic, as well as in the Jewish and the Christian tradition, there are three theological assumptions on which the super-structure of men’s alleged superiority to women has been erected. These three assumptions are: (1) that God’s primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to

have been created from man's rib, hence, women are derivative and secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is generally referred to as "Man's Fall" or man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence, "all daughters of Eve" are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt; and (3) that woman was created not only *from* man but also *for* man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not fundamental. The three theological questions to which the above assumptions may appropriately be regarded as answers are: (1) How was woman created? (2) Was woman responsible for the "Fall" of man? and (3) Why was woman created?

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to deal exhaustively with any of these questions. However, I would like to take a few moments to focus on the first question, which deals with the issue of woman's creation. I consider this issue to be more basic and important, philosophically and theologically, than any other in the context of woman-man equality, because if man and woman have been created equal by Allah, who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time. On the other hand, if man and woman have been created unequal by Allah, then they cannot become equal, essentially, at a subsequent time.

The Issue of Woman's Creation

The ordinary Muslim believes, as sincerely as the ordinary Jew or Christian, that Adam was God's primary creation and that Eve was made from Adam's rib. While this myth is obviously rooted in the Yahwist's account of creation in Genesis 2: 18-24, it has no basis whatever in the Qur'ān, which describes the creation of humanity in completely egalitarian terms. In the thirty or so passages pertaining to the subject of human creation, the Qur'ān uses generic terms for humanity ("*an-nās*," "*al-insān*," "*basbar*") and there is no mention in it of Ḥawwā' (Eve). The word "Adam" occurs twenty-five times in the Qur'ān, but it is used in twenty-one cases as a symbol for self-conscious humanity. Here, it is pertinent to point out that the word "Adam" is a Hebrew word (from "*adamah*" meaning "the soil") and it functions generally as a collective noun referring to "the human" rather than to a male person. In the Qur'ān, the word "Adam" does not refer to a particular human being. Rather, it refers to human beings in a particular way. As pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal:

Indeed, in the verses which deal with the origin of man as a living being, the Qurʾān uses the words “Bashar” or “Insān,” not “Adam,” which it reserves for man in his capacity as God’s vicegerent on earth. The purpose of the Qurʾān is further secured by the omission of proper names mentioned in the Biblical narration — Adam and Eve. The term “Adam” is retained and used more as a concept than as a name of a concrete human individual. The word is not without authority in the Qurʾān itself.³

An analysis of the Qurʾānic descriptions of human creation shows that the Qurʾān evenhandedly uses both feminine and masculine terms and imagery to describe the creation of humanity from a single source. That God’s original creation was undifferentiated humanity and neither man nor woman is implicit in a number of Qurʾānic passages. If the Qurʾān makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman, as it clearly does not, why do Muslims believe that Ḥawwā’ was created from Adam’s rib? It is difficult to imagine that Muslims got this idea directly from Genesis 2, since very few Muslims read the Bible. It is much more likely that the rib story entered Islamic tradition through incorporation in the Ḥadīth literature during the early centuries of Islam. In this context, the following six narratives are particularly important since they are cited in the Ḥadīth collections *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, whose authority, in the opinion of Sunni Muslims, is exceeded only by that of the Qurʾān:

1. Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you would try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely.⁴
2. The woman is like a rib, if you try to straighten her, she will break. So if you want to get benefit from her, do so while she still has some crookedness.⁵
3. Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt (trouble) his neighbor. And I advise you to take care of the women, for they are created from a rib and the most crooked part of the rib is its upper part; if you try to straighten it, it will break, and if you leave it, it will remain crooked, so I urge you to take care of woman.⁶
4. Woman is like a rib. When you attempt to straighten it, you would break it. And if you leave her alone you would benefit by her, and crookedness will remain in her.⁷
5. Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so if you wish to benefit by her, benefit by her while

crookedness remains in her. And if you attempt to straighten her, you will break her, and breaking her is divorcing her.⁸

6. He who believes in Allah and the Hereafter, if he witnesses any matter he should talk in good terms about it or keep quiet. Act kindly towards women, for woman is created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, its crookedness will remain there so act kindly towards women.⁹

In my research and writings, I have examined the above traditions and shown them to be weak with regard to their formal aspect (i.e. with reference to their *"isnad"* or list of transmitters). As far as their content (*"matn"*) is concerned, it is obviously in opposition to Qur'anic accounts about human creation. Since all Muslim scholars agree on the principle that any Ḥadīth that is in contradiction to the Qur'ān cannot be accepted as authentic, the above-mentioned narrative ought to be rejected on material grounds. However, these Ḥadīth continue to be a part of Islamic tradition. This is certainly due, in significant measure, to the fact that they are included in the two collections of Ḥadīth which "form an almost unassailable authority, subject indeed to criticisms in details, yet deriving an indestructible influence from the *'ijma'* or general consent of the community in custom and belief, which it is their function to authenticate."¹⁰ The continuing popularity of these narratives among Muslims in general also indicates that they articulate something deeply embedded in Muslim culture, namely, the belief that women are derivative and secondary in the context of human creation.

Theologically, the history of women's inferior status in the Islamic (as well as the Jewish and Christian) tradition began with the story of Eve's creation from a (crooked) rib. The negative impact of this story on the life of Jewish, Christian and Muslim women is impossible to overstate. However, if one bears in mind that the rib story has no place in the Qur'ān, which upholds the view that man and woman were created equal by God, then the existing inequality between men and women cannot be seen as having been mandated by God but must be seen as a subversion of God's original plan for humanity.

Muslim Women: Qur'anic Ethics versus Muslim Practice

Reference has been made in the foregoing account to the fundamental theological assumptions which have colored the way in which Muslims, in

general, have viewed women. The fact that these assumptions have had serious negative consequences and implications, both theoretical and practical, for Muslim women throughout Muslim history up to the present time needs to be emphasized. At the same time, it is important to stress that the Qurʾān, which to Muslims in general is the most authoritative source of Islam, does not discriminate against women. Still, the sad and bitter fact of history is that the cumulative (Jewish, Christian, Hellenic, Bedouin, and other) biases which existed in the Arab-Islamic culture of the early centuries of Islam infiltrated Islamic tradition, largely through the Ḥadīth literature, and undermined the intent of the Qurʾān to liberate women from the status of chattel or inferior creatures, making them free and equal to men. Not only does the Qurʾān emphasize that righteousness is identical in the case of man and woman, but it affirms, clearly and consistently, women's equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential that they share equally with men. In fact, when seen through a non-patriarchal lens, the Qurʾān goes beyond egalitarianism. It exhibits particular solicitude toward women as also toward other classes of disadvantaged persons. Further, it provides particular safeguards for protecting women's special sexual/biological functions such as carrying, delivering, suckling, and rearing offspring.

God, who speaks through the Qurʾān, is characterized by justice, and it is stated clearly in the Qurʾān that God can never be guilty of *"ulm"* (tyranny, oppression, or wrongdoing). Hence, the Qurʾān, as God's Word, cannot be made the source of human injustice, and the injustice to which Muslim women have been subjected cannot be regarded as God-derived. The goal of Qurʾānic Islam is to establish peace which can only exist within a just environment. It is important to note here that there is more Qurʾānic legislation pertaining to the establishment of justice in the context of family relationships than on any other subject. This points to the assumption implicit in much Qurʾānic legislation, namely, that if human beings can learn to order their homes justly, so that the rights of all within it—children, women, men—are safeguarded, then they can also justly order their society and the world at large. In other words, the Qurʾān regards the home as a microcosm of the *"ummah"* (community of believers) and the world community, and emphasizes the importance of making it "the abode of peace" through just living.

In my judgment, the importance of developing what the West calls "feminist theology" in the context of the Islamic tradition is paramount today in order to liberate not only Muslim women, but also Muslim men, from unjust social structures and systems of thought which make a peer

relationship between men and women impossible. It is extremely important for Muslim women activists to realize that in the contemporary Muslim world, laws instituted in the name of Islam cannot be overturned by means of political action alone, but through the use of better religious arguments. The late Professor Fazlur Rahman of the University of Chicago once said that the tragedy of modern Muslims lies in the fact that those who understood modernity do not understand Islam, and those who understand Islam do not understand modernity. In my opinion, a greater tragedy lies in the fact that Islam seems to be represented globally by two extreme groups. One presents Islam in extremely narrow and conservative terms, and the other opposes human rights as they are defined in Western secular discourse. The majority of the educated Muslims who, in my opinion, tend to be progressive rather than conservative, appear to be marginalized, even though it is from among such people that the reformers who liberated the Muslim world from colonialism came. Neither the extreme right nor the anti-religious groups which have “hijacked” human rights in many Muslim countries represent the vast majority of Muslims who are religious without being fanatic, narrow-minded or inclined toward violence and terrorism.

Muslim Women: A Paradigm Shift from Re-active to Pro-active

Santayana remarked with acute insight that those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it. Stating the same idea in another way, a Muslim scholar once said to me, “If you are going somewhere in a train and you realize after some time that the train has somehow become derailed and is going in the wrong direction, you cannot at that moment get back on the right track. You have first to get back to the point at which you got off-track and then you can get back on-track.” Women in general need to know the point at which they became derailed in history in order to reclaim their proper place in the world. I believe strongly that by means of feminist theology, it is possible to equip and empower women to combat the gender-inequality and injustice to which they have subjected for a very long time.

The United Nations Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994, was an extremely important landmark in raising global consciousness with regard to a number of issues that are central to the lives of women. The conference, which was held in one of the most important Muslim capitals of the world, was particularly momentous for Muslim women, who participated in record numbers. The presence in Cairo of Al-Azhar University, the oldest university in the world,

whose *fatwas*” or religious proclamations carry much weight among Muslims, added further significance to the venue of this meeting.

In an opening session, three male professors representing Al-Azhar University presented what were labeled “Muslim viewpoints” on the subject of “Religion, population and development.” Only a small part of their presentations, however, dealt with the topic of population and development, which was the subject of the conference. After stating that Islam was not against family planning but that it allows abortion only to save the mother’s life or health, the speakers focused on the status or position of women in the Islamic tradition. The purpose of this panel presentation by high-powered representatives of the most prestigious Muslim university in the world was to pre-empt any discussion on the subject of Muslim women by making the “privileged” position of women in Islam clear to both the Western media (which stereotypes Muslim women as “poor and oppressed”) and to Muslim women themselves. Muslim women were conspicuous in their absence from the panel of presenters. However, in interventions from the floor, the “Muslim viewpoints” represented by the three men were challenged. Muslim women demanded “equal time” and they got that and more, especially in subsequent days when a number of sessions were held at the NGO Forum in which Muslim women figured significantly, and in which women-related issues were explicated by women themselves.

Women’s identification with body rather than with mind and spirit is a common feature of many religious, cultural and philosophical traditions. However, though women traditionally have been identified with body, they have not been seen as “owners” of their bodies. The question of who controls women’s bodies—men, the State, the Church, the Community, or women—was one of the most important underlying issues of the Cairo Conference. The fact that Muslim women forcefully challenged the traditional viewpoint not only with regard to women’s identification with body, but also with regard to the control of the woman’s body, indicates that Muslim women are no longer nameless and faceless, and that they are ready to stand up and be counted.

It has now been globally accepted that issues which may appear to pertain primarily to a woman’s body, namely those of contraception and abortion, cannot be examined in isolation from the larger factor of women’s over-all development as human beings. However, as pointed out by a number of persons and agencies, the primary focus of the Cairo Conference was on “population” issues focusing on the body, rather than on “development” issues, which focus on the whole person.

The challenge before women in general, and Muslim women in particular, is to shift from the re-active mindset in which it is necessary for women to assert their autonomy over their bodies in the face of strong opposition from patriarchal structures and systems of thought and behavior, to a pro-active mindset in which they can, finally, begin to speak of themselves as full and autonomous human beings who have not only a body, but also a mind and a spirit. What do Muslim women, who along with Muslim men have been designated as God's vicegerents on earth by the Qur'an, understand to be the meaning of their lives? Reacting against the Western model of human liberation no longer suffices as a pro-active orientation. What is required is a positive formulation of one's goals and objectives. The critical issue upon which Muslim women are called to reflect with utmost seriousness is what kind of model or models of human self-actualization can be developed within the framework of normative Islam which takes account both of the realities of the contemporary Muslim world and of its ideals?

I would like to say a word to those human rights groups in the Muslim world which adopt the position that human rights and Islam are incompatible and that the abandonment of Islam is a pre-condition for women's liberation from oppression and development. In my judgment, the average Muslim woman in the world has three characteristics: she is poor, she is illiterate and she lives in a rural environment. If I, as a human rights activist, wanted to "liberate" this average Muslim woman living anywhere from Ankara to Jakarta, I could not do so by talking to her about the 1948 U.N. Declaration on Human Rights, because this means nothing to her. It is possible for me to reach this woman's heart and mind and soul by reminding her that God is just and merciful and that, as a creature of this just and merciful God, she is entitled to justice and protection from every kind of oppression and inequity. I make this statement because I have seen the eyes of many Muslim women who have lived their lives in hopelessness and helplessness light up when they realize what immense possibilities for development exist for them within the framework of the belief-system which defines their world.

I would also like to make note of the representation of Muslim women in the West and by the Western media. Since the 1970s, the West has shown a growing interest in Islam and Muslims. Much of this interest has been focused, however, on a few subjects, such as "Islamic Revival," "Islamic Fundamentalism," "The Salman Rushdie Affair," and "Women in Islam," rather than on understanding the complexity and diversity of the world of Islam. Both the choice of subjects, which tends to evoke or provoke strong emotive responses in Westerners and in Muslims, and the

manner in which these subjects have generally been portrayed by Western media or popular literature, call into question the motivation which underlies the selective Western interest in Islam and Muslims.

Given the reservoir of negative images associated with Islam and Muslims in “the Collective Unconscious” of the West, it is hardly surprising that, since the demise of the Soviet Empire, the world of Islam is portrayed as the new “Enemy,” one which is perhaps even more incomprehensible and seemingly intractable than the last. The routine portrayal of Islam as a religion spread by the sword and characterized by “Holy War,” and of Muslims as barbarous and backward, frenzied and fanatic, volatile and violent, has led in recent times to an alarming increase in “Muslim-bashing” — verbal, physical and psychological — in a number of Western countries. In the midst of so much hatred and aversion toward Islam and Muslims in general, the outpouring of so much sympathy, in and by the West, toward Muslim women appears, on the surface, to be an amazing contradiction. Are Muslim women not also adherents of Islam? And are Muslim women not also victims of “Muslim-bashing?” Few of us can forget the brutal burning of Turkish Muslim girls by German gangsters or the ruthless rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serbian soldiers.

Since the modern notion of human rights originated in a Western, secular context, Muslims in general, but Muslim women in particular, find themselves in a quandary when they initiate or participate in a discussion of human rights, whether in the West or in Muslim societies. Based on their life experiences, most Muslim women who become human rights advocates or activists feel strongly that virtually all Muslim societies discriminate against women from cradle to grave. This leads many of them to become deeply alienated from Muslim culture in a number of ways. This sense of alienation oftentimes leads to anger and bitterness toward the patriarchal structures and systems of thought which dominate Muslim societies. Muslim women often find much support and sympathy in the West, so long as they are seen as rebels and deviants within the world of Islam. But many of them begin to realize, sooner or later, that while they have serious difficulties with Muslim culture, for many reasons, they are also not able to identify with Western, secular culture. This realization leads them to feel, at least for a time, isolated and alone. Much attention has been focused in the Western media and literature on the sorry plight of Muslim women who are “poor and oppressed” in visible or tangible ways. Hardly any notice has been taken, however, of the profound tragedy and trauma suffered by the self-aware Muslim women of today who are struggling to maintain their religious identity and personal autonomy in the face

of the intransigence of Muslim culture, on the one hand, and the imperialism of Western, secular culture, on the other.

While the West constantly bemoans what it refers to as the “rise of Islamic fundamentalism,” it does not extend significant recognition or support to progressive Muslims who are far more representative of “mainstream” modern Islam than either the conservative Muslims on the right or the “secular” Muslims on the left. Even after the Iranian Revolution and the “Islamization” of an increasing number of Muslim societies, many Western analysts are still unable or unwilling to see Islam as a religion capable of being interpreted in a progressive way or as a source of liberation to Muslim peoples. An even deeper problem is their refusal to understand the pivotal role of Islam in the lives of Muslims, the vast majority of whom, in a worldwide community estimated to be over one billion, are “believers” rather than “unbelievers.” Compelled by facts of modern history, some social scientists in the West are now beginning to concede that Islam is *one* of the factors which needs to be considered — along with political, economic, ethnic, social and other factors — in planning and evaluating development projects. This approach is still not adequate for understanding the issues of the Muslim world or finding ways of resolving problems. Islam is not, in my judgment, simply *one* of the factors which impact the lives of Muslims. It is the *matrix* in which all other factors are grounded. I do not believe that any viable model of self-actualization can be constructed in Muslim societies for women or men which is outside the framework of normative Islam deriving from Qur’anic teachings and exemplified in the life of the Prophet of Islam. Nor do I believe that any profoundly meaningful or constructive dialogue can take place between “the World of Islam” and “the West” without proper recognition of what Islam means to millions of Muslims.

Endnotes

1. Saiyyad: descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad.
2. See Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994).
3. One is reminded here of the classic statement by St. Augustine that women ought not to intrude into public space because “they cause erections even in holy men!”
4. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1962), 83.
5. M.M Khan, Translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī* (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1971), 346.
6. *Ibid.*, 80.

7. *Ibid.*, 81.
8. A.H. Siddiqui, translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, volume 2 (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1972), 752.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 752-53.
11. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
12. Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966), 32.

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