

# *I s l a m*

*By Riffat Hassan*

THE STORY OF my life began in an old house that stood at the end of a galee, or narrow street, adjoining Temple Road in the historic city of Lahore in what is now Pakistan. From an objective standpoint, my siblings and I were privileged children. We were born into an upper-class Saiyyad family, and the Saiyyads, being the descendants of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, are regarded as the highest caste of Muslims, even though Muslims constantly protest against the idea that Islam has any caste system. My father and mother came from among the oldest and most distinguished families in the city. We lived in a spacious kothee (bungalow) and had a glamorous automobile (when only a handful of people had any) and a household full of servants who performed all the domestic chores. We went to the best English-medium schools (which were regarded as a status symbol), where we received a sound British education. However with all of these bounties, I have few happy memories of the house in which I was born, where I spent the first seventeen years of my life. What I remember most distinctly about being a child was how lonely I felt in a house full of people, and how unhappy, scared, and bewildered I was most of the time.

My father was resolutely traditional and conventional. Through most of my life I hated his traditionalism, because I understood it almost exclusively in terms of his belief in gender roles and his conviction that it was best for girls to be married at age sixteen to someone who had been

picked out for them by their parents. My mother was equally resolute, but as a non-conformist. What made her very unusual in a traditional society, and in my father's house, was her rejection of the hallowed cult of women's inferiority and submissiveness to men. Pre-Islamic Arabs had buried their daughters alive because they regarded daughters not only as economic liabilities but also as potential hazards to the honor of the men in the tribe. Islam notwithstanding, the attitude of Muslims toward daughters has remained very similar to that of their nomadic forebears. Against this, my mother, a gifted poet with a brilliant mind, believed strongly in women's autonomy and independence. She protected me from being sacrificed on the altar of blind conventionalism and certainly gave me the opportunity to become a "person." Although long before I began to understand the complexities and ambiguities of the Muslim value-system, I knew that my mother would not win any popularity contest vis-à-vis my father. My father, who was admired and loved by so many, seemed to me through most of my early life to be a figure of dread, representing conventional morality in a society that demanded that female children be discriminated against from the moment of birth.

My twelfth year was a landmark year because during it my struggle as an activist feminist began. Until that time I had been a quiet child living for the most part in an inner sanctuary. My second sister, who was sixteen, was married off to a man with a lot of money and very little education. She had tried to resist the arranged marriage but had succumbed, as most girls do, to the multifarious, crude as well as subtle, ways of persuading wavering girls to accept the arrangement in order to safeguard the family's "honor" and her own "happiness." Seeing her fall into the all-too-familiar trap, I experienced total panic. I was the next in line. At twelve I had not yet learned to fight. I had not wanted to learn to fight. I simply wanted to be left alone in my dream world, where I could write my poems and read my books . . . but I knew then, as I know now, that if one is born female in a patriarchal society in which girls are regarded as objects to be given and taken, one has no option but to fight. And so I learned to fight, and the fight continues to this day.

That year my father wanted me to withdraw from the co-educational school where I studied and enroll in an all-girls school. Thinking with the mind of a twelve-year-old, I believed that if I said yes to him once, I would always have to say yes to him. Therefore, I refused and said that if I

was forced to leave the school where I had studied for a number of years (and where my brothers still studied), I would not go to another school. Fortunately my father did not force me to leave, but he upbraided my mother constantly for spoiling and misguiding me. From that point on, my mother believed that I had what it took to do what she had wanted to do in her life. Much of what I am today is due to my mother's schooling. But, I could never become the Nietzschean superwoman with a will-to-power she wanted me to be.

My career as a feminist theologian began—almost by accident—in the midst of a very difficult period of my life when I had moved with my very young child to a little-known place called Stillwater, Oklahoma. I had a Ph.D. but very few survival skills when my search for a job that could support me and my child, after the collapse of a marriage in which I had invested a lot, brought me to a small university town in which I knew no one. There, in the fall of 1974, I was asked to be the faculty adviser to the Muslim Students Association (MSA) chapter at Oklahoma State University (OSU), where I had been appointed a visiting assistant professor in Religion and Humanities. The MSA had chapters in many colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.

The membership of the MSA chapter at OSU consisted entirely of Arab men largely from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. These men were so patriarchal in their mindset that they did not allow women to become members of the MSA. However, there was a rule at OSU whereby every student chapter had to have a faculty adviser, and that year I happened to be the only Muslim faculty member on campus. This is how I came to be the faculty adviser to this group of Arab men who made it clear to me from the outset that they were not too thrilled at the prospect of working with a woman!

The MSA at OSU had a tradition of having an annual seminar in late fall, and it was customary for the faculty adviser to make an introductory presentation on the subject or theme of the seminar. However, in my case, I was asked to read a paper on women in Islam which—incidentally—was not the subject of that year's seminar. Knowing that, in general, faculty advisers were not assigned specific subjects, I resented being asked to address a topic in which I was not much interested at that time. Furthermore, I knew that I had been assigned this particular subject because in the opinion of most of the chapter members, it would have been wholly 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. Despite my reservations I accepted the invitation for two reasons. First, I knew that being asked to address an all-male, largely Arab Muslim group, which excluded women from being even a part of the audience (though many of the male Arabs had wives who helped them in organizing the event) and which thought that hearing the voice of a woman unrelated to them was haram (forbidden), all this was in itself a breakthrough. Second, I was so tired of hearing Muslim men pontificate upon the position, status, or role of women in Islam, while it was totally inconceivable any woman could presume to talk about the position, status, or role of men in Islam. I thought that it might be worthwhile for a Muslim woman to present her viewpoint on a subject whose immense popularity with Muslim men, scholars and non-scholars alike, could easily be gauged by the ever increasing number of books, booklets, brochures, and articles they published on it. Having accepted the invitation, I began my research, more out of a sense of duty than with any clear awareness that I had set out on the most important journey of my life.

Prior to engaging in any discussion of women's issues in Islam, it is useful to have a clear understanding of what is meant by the source works of Islam or the Islamic tradition, since there is much confusion regarding the range of the meaning of these terms. If one asks an average Muslim what he or she understands by Islam or the Islamic tradition, he or she is likely to refer to one or more of the following sources: the Qur'an (the Book of Revelations), the Sunnah (the practice of the Prophet Muhammad), Hadith (the sayings ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad), Fiqh (Jurisprudence), Madahib (Schools of Law), and the Shari'ah (the code of laws that regulates all aspects of Muslim life). If all of the above-mentioned sources of Islam formed a coherent, homogeneous body of knowledge, perhaps one could include all of them in the term Islam. But this is very far from being the case. Not only are there numerous problems of internal inconsistency within the area of Hadith and Sunnah and the Schools of Law, for example, but also it does not seem possible, in my opinion, to resolve the conflicts among the different "sources" of Islam.

The Islamic tradition, like the other major religious traditions of the world, comes from multiple sources. The most important among these sources are The Qur'an; Sunnah and Hadith; Ijma'; and Qiyas or Ijtihad. Given below are points of significance pertaining to each of these sources.

(1) The Qur'an: Muslims believe the Qur'an to be God's unadulterated Word transmitted through the agency of Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, a Meccan Arab born in A.D. 570. The Qur'an consists of a series of revelations that the Prophet Muhammad received over a period of about 23 years. He conveyed these revelations without error or change to the first body of Muslims. The revelations were recorded during the lifetime of Muhammad, who recited the Qur'an in its entirety before his death. The Qur'an consists of a single, standardized text in Arabic, which, unlike some other sacred books, does not have multiple versions, though it has been translated into numerous languages. For Muslims the Qur'an is *the primary source* of normative Islam. The belief that there is no human element involved in the process of the transmission of revelation from God to humankind is what gives to the Qur'an its absolute authority.

(2) Sunnah and Hadith: Next to the Qur'an, the most important sources of the Islamic tradition are Sunnah or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, and Hadith or the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Since Islam, the youngest of the world's major religions, is fully historical, there is a good deal of information and documentation available with regards to the actions of the Prophet Muhammad. However, the area of Hadith, unlike that of Sunnah, is fraught with controversy. This has something to do with the fluid and changing nature of oral tradition itself, but there are also other reasons why many scholars of Islam have tended to express caution, if not skepticism, regarding the issue of the authenticity of individual ahadith (plural of hadith), or of Hadith literature as a whole.

The Arabian Peninsula, in which Islam arose, had been the home of nomadic tribes which had little experience of governance until they were unified into a Muslim ummah (community) by the new religion and its Prophet and left the shores of their homeland to encounter other cultures. The early Muslims had remarkable success in their outward march both eastward and westward and began the establishment of an empire stretching from Spain to India within the course of a century. However, in their encounter with other cultures that were very different from their own, they had to deal with a host of problems for which they had no ready-made solutions. It was natural for them to look for guidance in what they knew best—the Qur'an, and the example of the

Prophet Muhammad. Eagerness to use the Prophet's wisdom in resolving current issues led to a frantic search for ahadith. Soon there were millions of ahadith in circulation. This caused grave concern to the Muslim scholars of that time, some of whom set out to develop a system for the scientific study of the voluminous body of materials that comprises Hadith literature. Realizing that the vast majority of ahadith were not the words of the Prophet Muhammad, they established stringent rules for evaluating the authenticity of a hadith and the degree of reliability that could be attached to it.

Muhammad ibn Isma'il al Bukhari (A.D. 810–870) and Muslim bin al-Hajjaj (A.D. 817 or 821–875) were the compilers of the two most influential Hadith collections in Sunni Islam, which is followed by the majority of Muslims in the world. Although their work was thorough and painstaking, the area of Hadith literature remains problematic largely because the average Muslim lacks scientific knowledge of this discipline, which evolved to eliminate spurious or inauthentic ahadith.

With regards to the Hadith literature, a distinction needs to be made between those ahadith that are in conformity with the Qur'an and those that are not. Obviously the former must be accepted as "authentic" and the latter as "spurious." Those tenets of the Shari'ah that are based on the former confirm or reinforce Qur'anic teaching and, therefore, are binding on Muslims, but if there is anything in the Shari'ah that is based upon a hadith that can be shown to be contradictory to the Qur'an, then it is obviously not binding on Muslims. The situation regarding those areas of human life that are not directly covered by the Qur'an but are alluded to by the Hadith literature is more complicated. Not only must the relevant ahadith be tested for authenticity (in terms of the reliability of transmission) according to the technical criteria established by scholars with expertise in this area, but also the context and content of the ahadith must be scrutinized in order to determine whether the ahadith in question are merely descriptive or also normative. Muhammad Iqbal, modern Islam's most outstanding thinker, distinguishing between those ahadith that are of a purely legal character and those that are non-legal, observes:

With regards to the former, there arises a very important question as to how far they embody the pre-Islamic usages of Arabia which were

in some cases left intact, and in others modified by the Prophet. It is difficult to make this discovery, for our early writers do not always refer to pre-Islamic usages. Nor is it possible to discover that the usages, left intact by express or tacit approval of the Prophet, were intended to be universal in their application. Shah Wali Ullah has a very illuminating discussion on the point. I reproduce here the substance of his view. The prophetic method of teaching, according to Shah Wali Ullah, is that, generally speaking, the law revealed by a prophet takes a special note of the habits, ways and peculiarities of the people to whom he is specifically sent. The prophet who aims at all-embracing principles, however, can neither reveal different principles for different peoples nor leave them to work out their own rules of conduct. His method is to train one particular people, and to use them as a nucleus for the building up of a universal Shari'at (Shari'ah). In doing so he accentuates the principles underlying the social life of all mankind, and applies them to concrete cases in the light of the specific habits of the people immediately before him. The Shari'at (Shari'ah) values (Ahkam) resulting from this application (e.g., rules relating to penalties for crimes) are in a sense specific to that people; and since their observance is not an end in itself they cannot be strictly enforced in the case of future generations. It was perhaps in view of this that Abu Hanifa, who had a keen insight into the universal character of Islam, made practically no use of these traditions. The fact that he introduced the principle of "Istihsan," i.e. juristic preference, which necessitates a careful study of actual conditions in legal thinking, throws further light on the motives which determined his attitude towards this source of Muslim law.<sup>1</sup>

In the absence of a Qur'anic dictum on a particular issue, the degree of authority or applicability that a hadith ought to have would depend, then, on a number of factors with most of which the average Muslim is totally unfamiliar.

Complex as the area of Hadith is, it has been pointed out by noted Islamicists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that Hadith is very important as a source of law, and even of doctrine, in Islam. It has been the lens through which the Qur'an has been seen since the early centuries of Islam. Also,

the significance of its emotive aspect is hard to overstate, as anything associated with Prophet Muhammad evokes a high degree of veneration among Muslims.

(3) *Ijma'* denotes consensus of the community and is regarded as being "perhaps the most important legal notion in Islam" by Muhammad Iqbal, who observes:

It is strange that this important notion, while invoking great academic discussion in early Islam, remained practically a mere idea, and rarely assumed the form of a permanent institution in any Muslim country. Possibly its transformation into a permanent legislative institution was contrary to the political interests of the kind of absolute monarchy that grew up in Islam immediately after the fourth Caliph. . . . It is, however, extremely satisfactory to note that the pressure of new world forces and the political experience of European nations are impressing on the mind of modern Islam the value and possibilities of the idea of *Ijma'*. The growth of republican spirit, and the gradual formation of legislative assemblies in Muslim lands constitutes a great step in advance. The transfer of the power of *Ijtihad* from individual representatives of schools to a Muslim legislative assembly which, in view of the growth of opposing sects, is the only possible form *Ijma'* can take in modern times, will secure contributions to legal discussions from laymen who happen to possess a keen insight into affairs. In this way alone we can stir into activity the dormant spirit of life in our legal system, and give it an evolutionary outlook.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional Islam has taken the position that the *Ijma'* of the first three centuries of Islam is "protected from error" and thus binding on all future generations and that in view of its infallibility and authority there is no need for any *Ijma'* in the present or the future. Some modern thinkers have challenged this position pointing out that "protection from error" is not to be understood in an absolute sense and does not amount to infallibility for all times as only Allah is infallible in an absolute sense; therefore, though the *Ijma'* of a particular period or place may be regarded as authoritative for that period or place it does not bind all Muslims of all times and places. In this context, Iqbal discriminates between



a decision relating to a question of fact and the one relating to a question of law. In the former case, as for instance, when the question arose whether the two small Suras known as “Muavazatain” formed part of the Qur’an or not, and the Companions unanimously decided that they did, we are bound by their decision, obviously because the Companions alone were in a position to know the fact. In the latter case the question is one of interpretation only, and I venture to think, on the authority of Karkhi, that later generations are not bound by the decision of the Companions. Says Karkhi: The Sunnah of the Companions is binding in matters which cannot be cleared up by Qiyas, but it is not so in matters which can be established by Qiyas.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up this point, Ijma’ that derives its sanction from a number of Qur’anic texts (e.g., Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 43; Surah 3: Al-‘Imran: 102; Surah 4: An-Nisa’: 115) is an invaluable instrument of law-making by means of which Islam can become dynamic but it has been used—unfortunately—to keep Islam static through the insistence of the traditionalists who say that only the Ijma’ of a particular time or group of people is to be considered a source of the Shari’ah. This attitude is not defensible either from the perspective of Qur’anic teaching, which condemns blind imitation of “tradition,” or on grounds of human reason.

(4) Qiyas or analogical deduction is a form of Ijtihad that literally means “to exert.” Describing Ijtihad as “the principle of movement in Islam,” Iqbal says:

In the terminology of Islamic law, Ijtihad means to exert with a view to form an independent judgment on a legal question. The idea . . . has its origin in a well-known verse of the Qu’ran, “And to those who exert We show Our path!” We find it more definitely adumbrated in a tradition of the Holy Prophet. When Ma’ad was appointed ruler of Yemen, the Prophet is reported to have asked him how he would decide matters coming up before him. “I will judge matters according to the Book of God,” said Ma’ad. “But if the Book of God contains nothing to guide you?” “Then I will act on the precedents of the Prophet of God.” “But if the precedents fail?” “Then I will exert to form my own judgment.” The student of the

history of Islam, however, is well aware that with the political expansion of Islam systematic legal thought became an absolute necessity, and our early doctors of law, both of Arabian and non-Arabian descent, worked ceaselessly until all the accumulated wealth of legal thought found a final expression in our recognized schools of Law. These schools of law recognize three degrees of Ijtihad: (1) complete authority in legislation which is practically confined to the founders of schools, (2) relative authority which is to be exercised within the limits of a particular school, and (3) special authority which relates to the determining of the law applicable to a particular case left undetermined by the founders. . . . The theoretical possibility of (the first) degree of Ijtihad is admitted by the Sunnis, but in practice it has always been denied ever since the establishment of the schools, inasmuch as the idea of complete Ijtihad is hedged around by conditions which are well-nigh impossible of realization in a single individual. Such an attitude seems exceedingly strange in a system of law based mainly on the groundwork provided by the Qur'an which embodies an essentially dynamic outlook on life.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that the most profound of modern Muslim thinkers such as Syed Ahmad Khan and Iqbal stressed the tremendous importance of reopening the gates of Ijtihad at the same time as they advocated a return to the simplicity and universality of the Qur'an. Iqbal represents what I believe is the true spirit of Islam when he makes these observations concerning the exercise of Ijtihad:

I know the Ulama of Islam claim finality for the popular schools of Muslim Law, though they never found it possible to deny the theoretical possibility of a complete Ijtihad. . . . For fear of . . . disintegration, the conservative thinkers of Islam focused all their efforts on the one point of preserving a uniform social life for the people by a jealous exclusion of all innovations in the law of Shari'at (Shari'ah) as expounded by the early doctors of Islam. Their leading idea was social order, and there is no doubt that they were partly right, because organization does to a certain extent counteract the forces of decay. But they did not see, and our modern Ulama do not see, that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the

worth and power of individual men. In an over-organized society the individual is altogether crushed out of existence. . . . The closing of the door of Ijtihad is pure fiction suggested partly by the crystallization of legal thought in Islam, and partly by that intellectual laziness which, especially in a period of spiritual decay, turns great thinkers into idols. If some of the later doctors have upheld this fiction, modern Islam is not bound by this voluntary surrender of intellectual independence . . . since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why this attitude (of the Ulama) should be maintained any longer. Did the founders of our schools ever claim finality for their reasonings and interpretations? Never. The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles, in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modern life is, in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Qur'an that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.<sup>5</sup>

Having clarified what is meant by the sources of Islam, it needs to be underscored that despite Muslim claims that Islam has given women more rights than any other tradition, the Islamic tradition has, by and large, remained rigidly patriarchal. Muslim women, like women in other patriarchal cultures, have seldom been able to acquire scholarship, particularly in the realm of religious thought. This means that the sources of Islam have been interpreted almost exclusively by Muslim men, who have arrogated to 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. Here it needs to be mentioned that although the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those who live in rural areas where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world.

Between 1974 and 1984, I studied the Qur'anic passages relating to women and reinterpreted them from a non-patriarchal perspective. I was

also observing during my frequent visits to Pakistan and my travels in other Muslim countries that alarming developments were taking place under the cover of so-called Islamization. A simple definition of Islamization is that it is the promulgation by the governments of some Muslim countries of laws that are designed to make them more Muslim. If one examines the contents of these laws, one finds that their primary focus is women. In order to understand the motivation underlying the Islamization process, it is useful to bear in mind that of all the challenges confronting the contemporary Muslim world, the greatest appears to be that of modernity. Unable to come to grips with modernity as a whole, many contemporary Muslim societies make a sharp distinction between two aspects of it. The first—generally referred to as modernization and largely approved of—is identified with science, technology, and a better standard of living. The second—generally referred to as Westernization and largely disapproved of—is identified with emblems of mass Western culture such as promiscuity, the breakup of family and community, latch-key kids, and drug and alcohol abuse. Many Muslims see emancipated women not as symbols of modernization but as symbols of Westernization, which is linked not only with the colonization of Muslim people by Western powers in the not-too-distant past but also with the continuing onslaught by Westerners and Westernized Muslims on “the integrity of the Islamic way of life.”

Many traditional societies—including the Muslim—divide the world into private space (that is, the home, which is the domain of women) and public space (that is, the rest of the world, which is the domain of men). Muslims, in general, tend to believe that it is best to keep men and women segregated, in their separate, designated spaces, because the intrusion of women into men’s space is seen as leading to the disruption, if not the destruction, of the fundamental order of things. If some exigency makes it necessary for women to enter into men’s space, they must make themselves “faceless,” or, at least, as inconspicuous as possible. This is achieved through veiling, which is thus an extension of the idea of the segregation of the sexes.

Women-related issues pertaining to various aspects of personal as well as social life lie at the heart of much of the ferment or unrest that characterizes the Muslim world. Many of the issues are not new, but the manner in which they are being debated today is. Much of this on-going debate

has been generated by the enactment of manifestly anti-women laws in Muslim countries such as Pakistan, where General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq promulgated the Hudood Ordinance (1979), the Law of Evidence (1984), and the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance (1990), which discriminate against women in a blatant manner. These laws, which pertained to women's testimony in cases of their own rape or in financial and other matters and to blood money for women's murder, aimed at reducing the value and status of women systematically, virtually mathematically, to less than those of men. The emergence of women's protest groups in Pakistan was very largely a response to the realization that forces of religious conservatism (aided by the power of the military government) were determined to cut the status of women down to half or less of men, and that this attitude stemmed from a deep-rooted desire to keep women in their place, which is understood as being secondary, subordinate, and inferior to that of men.

In 1983–84, I spent two years in Pakistan. It was the time when Islamization was at its peak and there was a deluge not only of anti-women legislation but also of anti-women literature. Reflecting upon what I was witnessing, I asked myself how it was possible for laws that were archaic and unjust to be implemented in a society that professed a passionate commitment to modernity. The answer came to me with stunning clarity. Pakistani society (or any other Muslim society for that matter) could enact or accept laws that specified that women were less than men in fundamental ways because Muslims, in general, consider it a self-evident truth that women are not equal to men.

Because at that time I was the only Muslim woman in Pakistan who was attempting to interpret the Qur'an systematically from a nonpatriarchal 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 testimony in May 1984) to state what my findings were and if they could be used to improve the situation of women in Pakistani society. I was urged by those spirited women, who were mobilizing and leading women's protests in the streets, to help them refute the arguments that were being used to make them less than fully human on a case-by-case or point-by-point basis. However, I knew through my long and continuing struggle with the forces of Muslim traditionalism (which were now being gravely threatened by what was described as "the onslaught of Westernization under

the guise of modernization”) that the arguments being broadcast to keep women in their place were only the front line of attack. Behind and below these arguments were others, and no sooner would one line of attack be eliminated than another one would be set up in its place. What had to be done, first and foremost, in my opinion, 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 were *essentially* equal, despite biological and other differences.

As a result of my study and deliberation, I came to perceive that not only in the Islamic, but also in the Jewish and Christian, traditions, there are three theological assumptions on which the superstructure of men’s alleged superiority to women has been erected. These three assumptions are (1) that God’s primary creation is man, not woman, because woman is believed to have been created from man’s rib, hence is derivative and secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as the “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 of fundamental importance.

It is not possible, within the scope of this essay, to deal exhaustively with any of the above-mentioned questions. However, in the following brief discussion of each question, an attempt is made to highlight the way in which sources of normative Islam have been interpreted to show that women are inferior to men. Of these three questions, the first is the most fundamental.

This is so because if man and woman have been created equal by God, who is the ultimate arbiter of value, they cannot become unequal *essentially* at a subsequent time. On the other hand, if man and woman have been created unequal by God, then they cannot become equal *essentially* at a subsequent time.

Muslims generally believe, as seriously as many Jews or Christians, that Adam was God’s primary creation and that Eve was made from Adam’s rib. Although this myth is obviously rooted in the Yahwists’ account of creation in Genesis 2:18–24, it has no basis whatever in the Qur’an, which in the context of human creation speaks always in completely egalitarian

terms. In none of the thirty or so passages that describe the creation of humanity (designated by generic terms such as *an-nas*, *al-insan*, and *bashar*) by God in a variety of ways is there any statement that could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. The Qur'an notwithstanding, Muslims believe that Hawwa' (the Hebrew/Arabic counterpart of Eve), who incidentally is never mentioned in the Qur'an, was created from the "crooked" rib of Adam. Adam, by the way, is not an Arabic term but a Hebrew one, meaning "of the soil" (from *adamah*, the soil). The Hebrew term *Adam* functions generally as a collective noun referring to the human species rather than to a male human being. In the Qur'an also, the term *Adam* refers, in twenty-one out of twenty-five instances, to humanity. Here it is of interest to note that though the term *Adam* mostly does not refer to a particular human being, it does refer 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 Qur'an uses the words *Bashar* or *Insan*, not *Adam*, which it reserves for man in his capacity of God's viceregent on earth. The purpose of the Qur'an 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 Qur'an itself.<sup>6</sup>

If the Qur'an makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman—as it clearly does not—why do Muslims believe that Hawwa' was created from the rib of Adam? Although the Genesis 2 account of woman's creation is accepted by virtually all Muslims, it is difficult to believe that it entered the Islamic tradition directly, for very few Muslims ever read the Bible. It is much more likely that it became a part of Muslim heritage through its assimilation in the Hadith literature. That the Genesis 2 idea of woman being created from Adam's rib did, in fact, become incorporated in the Hadith literature is evident from a number of ahadith. Of these, six are particularly important since they appear to have had a formative impact on how Muslims have perceived women's being and sexuality as differentiated from men's. The *matn* (content) of these six

ahadith—three from Sahih Al-Bukhari and three from Sahih Muslim is given below:

- 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.<sup>7</sup>
- 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.<sup>8</sup>
- 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.<sup>9</sup>
- 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.<sup>10</sup>
- Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so 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.<sup>11</sup>
- 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, the crookedness will remain there so act kindly towards women.<sup>12</sup>

I have examined these ahadith elsewhere and have shown them to be flawed with regard to their formal (isnad) as well as their material (matn) aspects. The theology of woman implicit in these ahadith is based upon generalizations about her ontology, biology, and psychology contrary to the letter and spirit of the Qur'an. These ahadith ought, therefore, to have been rejected—because Muslim scholars agree on the principle that any hadith that is inconsistent with the Qur'an cannot be accepted. However, despite



the fact that the ahadith in question contradict the teachings of the Qur'an, they have continued to be an important part of the ongoing Islamic tradition. Undoubtedly one of the major reasons for this is that these ahadith come from the two most highly venerated Hadith collections by Muhammad ibn Isma'il al Bukhari and Muslim bin al-Hajjaj. These two collections, known collectively as Sahihan (from *sahih*, meaning authentic), "form an almost unassailable authority, subject indeed to criticism 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."<sup>13</sup> While inclusion in the Sahihan gives the ahadith in question much weight, their continuing popularity also tells us that they articulate something deeply embedded in Muslim culture—namely the belief that women are derivative creatures who can never be considered equal to men.

Many Muslims, like many Jews and Christians, would say that woman was responsible for the "Fall" of man or his expulsion from paradise, although nothing in the Qur'anic descriptions of the so-called Fall episode would warrant such an answer. Here it may be noted that—whereas in Genesis 3:6, the dialogue preceding the eating of the forbidden fruit by the human pair in the Garden of Eden is between the serpent and Eve (though Adam's presence is also indicated, as contended by feminist theologians) and this has provided the basis for the popular casting of Eve into the role of tempter, deceiver, and seducer of Adam—in the Qur'an, the Shaitan (Satan) has no exclusive dialogue with Adam's *zauj* (mate). In two of the three passages that refer to this episode, Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 35–39 and Surah 7: Al-A'raf: 19–25, the Shaitan is stated to have led both Adam and *zauj* astray though in the former (verse 36), no actual conversation is reported. In the remaining passage, namely, Surah 20: Ta-Ha: 115–24, it is Adam who is charged with forgetting his covenant with God (verse 115), who is tempted by the Shaitan (verse 120), and who disobeys God and allows himself to be seduced (verse 121). If, however, one looks at all three passages as well as the way in which the term Adam functions generally in the Qur'an, it becomes clear that the Qur'an regards the act of disobedience by the human pair in *al-jannah* (the Garden) as a collective rather than an individual act for which exclusive, or even primary, responsibility is not assigned to either man or woman. Even in the last passage in which Adam appears to be held responsible for forgetting the

covenant and for allowing himself to be beguiled by the Shaitan, the act of disobedience, that is, the eating from the “Tree,” is committed jointly by Adam and *zauj* and not by Adam alone or in the first place.

That said, it is extremely important to stress that the Qur’an provides no basis whatever for asserting, suggesting, or implying that *Hawwa’*, having been tempted and deceived by the Shaitan, in turn tempted and deceived Adam and led to his expulsion from *al-jannah*. This fact notwithstanding, many Muslim commentators have ascribed the primary responsibility for man’s Fall to woman. There is hardly any doubt that Muslim women have been as victimized as Jewish and Christian women by the way in which the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions have generally interpreted the Fall episode. However, it needs to be pointed out that the Qur’anic account of the episode differs significantly from the Biblical account and that the Fall does not mean in the Islamic tradition what it means in the Jewish, and particularly in the Christian, tradition.

To begin with, whereas in Genesis 3 no explanation is given as to why the serpent tempts either Eve alone or both Adam and Eve, in the Qur’an the reason why the Shaitan sets out to beguile the human pair in *al-jannah* is stated clearly in a number of passages. The refusal of the Shaitan to obey God’s command to bow in submission to Adam follows from his belief that, being a creature of fire, he is elementally superior to Adam, who is a creature of clay. When condemned for his arrogance by God and ordered to depart in a state of abject disgrace, the Shaitan throws a challenge to the Almighty: he will prove to God that Adam and Adam’s progeny are unworthy of the honor and favor bestowed on them by God, being, in general, ungrateful, weak, and easily lured away from the straight path by worldly temptations. Not attempting to hide his intentions to “come upon” human beings from all sides, the Shaitan asks for—and is granted—a reprieve until the Day of the Appointed Time. Not only is the reprieve granted but God also tells the Shaitan to use all his wiles and forces to assault human beings and see if they would follow him. A cosmic drama now begins, involving the eternal opposition between the principles of right and wrong or good and evil, which is lived out because human beings, exercising their moral autonomy, must now choose between the straight path and the crooked path.

In terms of the Qur'anic narrative, what happens to the human pair in al-jannah is a sequel to the interchange between God and Shaitan. In the sequel we learn that Adam and *zauj* have been commanded not to go near the Tree lest they become *zalimin* (transgressors). Seduced by the Shaitan, they disobey God. However, in Surah 7: Al-A'raf: 23, they acknowledge before God that they have done *zulm* (transgression) to themselves and earnestly seek God's forgiveness and mercy. They are told by God to go forth or descend from al-jannah, but in addressing them the Qur'an uses the dual form of address (referring exclusively to Adam and *zauj*) only once (in Surah 18: Ta-Ha: 123); for the rest, the plural form is used, which necessarily refers to more than two persons and is generally understood as referring to humanity as a whole.

In the framework of Qur'anic theology, the order to go forth from al-jannah given to Adam or the children of Adam cannot be considered a punishment because Adam was always meant to be God's viceregent on earth, as stated clearly in Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 30. The earth is not a place of banishment but is declared by the Qur'an to be humanity's dwelling place and a source of profit to it. The al-jannah mentioned in the Fall story is not—as pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal—"the supersensual paradise from which man is supposed to have fallen on this earth."<sup>14</sup>

There is, strictly speaking, no Fall in the Qur'an. What the Qur'anic narration focuses upon is the moral choice that humanity is required to make when confronted by the alternatives presented to them by God and the Shaitan. This becomes clear if one reflects on the text of Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 35 and Surah 7: Al-A'raf: 19: "You [dual] go not near this Tree, lest you [dual] become of the 'zalimin'." In other words, the human pair is being told that if they go near the Tree, then they will be counted among those who perpetrate *zulm*. Commenting on the root ZLM, Toshihiko Izutsu says:

The primary meaning of ZLM is, in my opinion and of many of the authoritative lexicologists, that of "putting in a wrong place." In the moral sphere it seems to mean primarily "to act in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person." Briefly and generally speaking *zulm* is to do injustice

in the sense of going beyond one's bounds and doing what one has no right to.<sup>15</sup>

By transgressing the limits set by God, the human pair become guilty of *zulm* toward themselves. This *zulm* consists in their taking on the responsibility for choosing between good and evil. Here it is important to note that

. . . the Qur'anic legend of the Fall has nothing to do with the first appearance of man on this planet. Its purpose is rather to indicate man's rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience. The Fall does not mean any depravity, it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of personal casuality in one's own being. Nor does the Qur'an regard the earth as a torture hall where an elementally wicked humanity is imprisoned for an original act of sin. Man's first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice; and that is why, according to the Qur'anic narration, Adam's first transgression was forgiven. . . . A being whose movements are wholly determined like a machine cannot produce goodness. Freedom is thus a condition of goodness. But to permit the emergence of a finite ego who has the power to choose after considering the relative values of several courses of action open to him, is really to take a great risk: for the freedom to choose good involves also the freedom to choose what is the opposite of good. That God has taken this risk shows his immense faith in man, it is now for man to justify this faith.<sup>16</sup>

Because there is no Fall in the Qur'an, there is no original sin. Human beings are not born sinful into this world, hence do not need to be redeemed or saved. This is generally accepted in the Islamic tradition. However, the association of the Fall with sexuality, which has played such a massive role in perpetuating the myth of feminine evil in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, also exists in the minds of many Muslims and causes untold damage to Muslim women.

The Qur'an, which does not discriminate against women in the context of the Fall episode, does not support the view—held by many Muslims, Christians, and Jews—that woman was created not only from man but also for man. That God's creation as a whole is “for just ends” (Surah 15: Al-Hijr: 85) and not “for idle sport” (Surah 21: Al-Anbiya': 16) is one of the major themes of the Qur'an. Humanity, fashioned “in the best of moulds” (Surah 95: At-Tin: 4) has been created in order to serve God (Surah 51: Adh-Dhariyat: 56). God cannot be separated from service to humankind, or—in Islamic terms—believers in God must honor both Haquq Allah (rights of God) and Haquq al- 'ibad (rights of creatures). Fulfillment of one's duties to God and humankind constitutes the essence of righteousness. That men and women are equally called upon by God to be righteous is stated unambiguously in a number of Qur'anic passages, such as the following:

Believers, men  
 And women, are guardians  
 of one another: they impose  
 What is just, and forbid  
 What is evil: they observe  
 Regular prayers, practice  
 Charity, and obey  
 God and his Apostle.  
 Upon them will God pour  
 His mercy: for God  
 Is exalted in power and wise,  
 God has promised to believers,  
 Men and women, gardens  
 Where rivers flow,  
 To dwell therein,  
 And beautiful mansions  
 In gardens of everlasting bliss.  
 But the greatest joy  
 Is the good pleasure of God:  
 That is the highest bliss.

The Qur'an makes clear that not only do men and women stand absolutely equal in the sight of God but also that they are protectors of each other. In other words, the Qur'an does not create a hierarchy in which men are placed above women, nor does it pit men against women in an adversary relationship. They are created as equal creatures of a universal, just, and merciful God whose pleasure it is that they live together in harmony and in righteousness.

Underlying the rejection in Muslim societies of the idea of man-woman equality is the deeply rooted belief that women who are inferior in creation (having been made from a crooked rib) and in righteousness (having helped the Shaitan in defeating God's plan for Adam) have been created mainly to be of use to men, who are superior to them.

The alleged superiority of men to women that permeates the Islamic (as well as the Jewish and Christian) tradition is grounded not only in Hadith literature but also in popular interpretations of some Qur'anic passages. Two Qur'anic passages—Surah 4: An-Nisa':34 and Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 288—in particular, are generally cited to support the contention that men have “a degree of advantage” over women. Of these, the first reads as follows in A. A. Maududi's translation of the Arabic text:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because men spend their wealth on women. Virtuous women are, thereof, obedient: they guard their rights carefully in their absence under the care and watch of Allah. As for those women whose defiance you have cause to fear, admonish them and keep them apart from your beds and beat them. Then, if they submit to you, do not look for excuses to punish them: note it well that there is Allah above you, Who is Supreme and Great.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the general Muslim understanding of Surah 4: An-nisa': 34, which is embodied in Maududi's translation. As soon as the issue of women's equality with men is raised, the immediate response by traditionalists is, “But don't you know that God says in the Qur'an that men are 'qawwamun' in relation to women and have the right to rule over them and even to beat them?” In fact, the mere statement “ar-rijal-o qawwamun-a 'ala'an-nisa'” (men are qawwamun in

relation to women) signifies the end of any attempt to discuss the issue of woman's equality with man in the Islamic ummah.

It is assumed by almost all who read Surah 4, verse 34, that it is addressed to husbands. The first point to be noted is that it is addressed to ar-rijal (men) and an-nisa' (women). In other words, it is addressed to all men and women of the Islamic community. Further, in relation to all the actions that are required to be taken, the plural and not the dual form (used when reference is made only to two persons) is found. Such usage makes clear that the orders contained in this verse were not addressed to a husband or wife but to the Islamic ummah in general.

The key word in the first sentence of this verse is qawwamun. This word has been translated variously as protectors and maintainers (of women), in charge (of women), having pre-eminence (above women), and sovereigns or masters (over women). Linguistically, the word qawwamun means breadwinners or those who provide a means of support or livelihood. A point of logic that must be made here is that the first sentence is not a descriptive one stating that all men as a matter of fact are providing for women, since obviously there are at least some men who do not provide for women. What the sentence is stating, rather, is that men ought to have the capability to provide (since "ought" implies "can"). In other words, this statement, which almost all Muslim societies have taken to be an actual description of all men, is in fact a normative statement pertaining to the Islamic concept of division of labor in an ideal family or community structure. The fact that men are qawwamun does not mean that women cannot or should not provide for themselves, but simply that in view of the heavy burden that most women shoulder in child bearing and rearing, they should not have the additional obligation of providing the means of living at the same time.

Continuing with the analysis of the passage, we come next to the idea that God has given the one more strength than the other. Most translations make it appear that the one who has more strength, excellence, or superiority is the man. However, the Qur'anic expression does not accord superiority to men. The expression literally means "some in relation to some," so that the statement could mean either some men are superior to some others (men and/or women). The interpretation that seems to me to be the most appropriate contextually is that some men are more blessed with the means to be better providers than are other men.

The next part of the passage begins with a “therefore,” which indicates that this part is conditional upon the first: in other words, if men fulfill their assigned function of being providers, women must fulfill their corresponding duties. Most translations describe this duty in terms of the wife being “obedient” to the husband. The word *salihat*, which is translated as “righteously obedient,” is related to the word *salahiat* (capability or potentiality). A woman’s special capability is to bear children, and she carries and protects the fetus (which is hidden from the eye) in her womb until it can be safely delivered.

What is outlined in the first part of this passage is a functional division of labor necessary for maintaining balance in any society. Men, who do not have to fulfill the responsibility of childbearing, are assigned the functions of being breadwinners. Women are exempted from the responsibility of being breadwinners in order that they may fulfill their function as child bearers. The two functions are separate but complementary and neither is higher or lower than the other.

The three injunctions in the second part of the verse were given to the Islamic ummah in order to meet a rather extraordinary possibility: a mass rebellion on the part of women against their role as child bearers—a function assigned to them by God. If all or most of the women in a Muslim society refused to bear children without just cause as a sign of organized defiance or revolt, this would mean the end of organized ummah. This situation must, therefore, be dealt with decisively. The first step to be taken is to find out the reasons for this act of defiance and to offer counseling. If this step is unsuccessful, the second step to be taken is isolation of the rebellious women from others. (It is to be noted here that the prescription is to leave the women in solitary confinement. By translating this line, “Keep them apart from your beds,” Maududi is suggesting, if not stating, that the judging party is the husband and not the Islamic community—an assumption not warranted by the text.) If the second step is also not successful, then the step of confining women for a longer period of time may be taken by the Islamic community or its representatives. Here, it is important to point out that the Arabic word *daraba*, which is generally translated as “beating,” has numerous meanings. When used in a legal context as it is here, it means “holding in confinement,” according to the authoritative lexicon *Taj al-’Arus*. (In Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 15, unchaste women are also prescribed the punishment of being confined to their homes.)



Although, through the centuries, Muslims have interpreted Surah 4: An-Nisa': 34 as giving men unequivocal mastery over women, a linguistically and philosophically/theologically accurate interpretation of this passage would lead to radically different conclusions. In simple words, this passage is saying that since only women can bear children (which is not to say that all women should bear children or that women's sole function is to bear children)—a function whose importance in the survival of any community cannot be questioned—they should not have the additional obligation of being breadwinners while they perform this function. Thus, during the period of a woman's childbearing, the function of breadwinning must be performed by men (not just husbands) in the Muslim ummah. Reflection on this Qur'anic passage shows that the division of functions mandated here is designed to ensure justice in the community as a whole. There are millions of women all over the world who are designated inaccurately as "single" parents (when, in fact, they are "double" parents) who bear and raise children singlehandedly, generally without much support from the community. This surely does not constitute a just situation. If children are the wealth and future of the ummah, the importance of protecting the function of childbearing and child raising becomes self-evident. Statistics from all over the world show that women and children left without the care and custodianship of men suffer from economic, social, psychological, and other ills. What Surah An-Nisa': 34 is ensuring is that this does not happen. It enjoins men in general to assume responsibility for women in general when they are performing the vitally important function of childbearing (other passages in the Qur'an extend this also to child rearing). Thus the intent of this passage, which has traditionally been used to subordinate women to men, is in fact to guarantee women the material (as well as moral) security needed by them during the period of pregnancy when breadwinning can become difficult or even impossible for them.

The second passage which mentions the so-called degree of advantage that men have over women is Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 228, which reads:

Divorced women  
Shall wait  
For a three-month period.  
Nor is it lawful for them

To hide what God  
 Hath created in their wombs,  
 If they have faith  
 In God and the last Day.  
 And their husbands  
 Have the better right  
 To take them back  
 In that period, if  
 They wish for reconciliation.  
 And women shall have rights  
 Similar to the rights  
 Against them, according  
 To what is equitable  
 But men have a degree  
 (of advantage) over them,  
 And God is Exalted in Power and Wise.

The advantage that men have over women in this context is that women must observe a three-month period called 'iddat before remarriage, but men are exempted from this requirement. The main reason why women are subjected to this restriction is because at the time of divorce a woman may be pregnant, and this fact may not become known for some time. As men cannot become pregnant, they are allowed to remarry without the waiting period.

In my judgment, the Qur'anic passages—in particular the two discussed above—on which the edifice of male superiority over women largely rests have been misread or misinterpreted, intentionally or unintentionally, by most Muslim societies and men. There is no question that if the Qur'an is read without patriarchal bias, it is extremely protective of the rights of women, especially within the home. There are more laws in the Qur'an about safeguarding the rights of all members of a family than on any other subject. The Qur'an recognized the weak and vulnerable situation of women at the time of the birth of Islam and aimed to uplift them in every way. This concern for women's empowerment was also central to the life and work of the Prophet Muhammad.

The revolution brought about by Islam in the nomadic society of Arabia, in which female children were often buried alive and in which

women could be sold or inherited, is illustrated very well by the outstanding women who have inspired Muslim women through the centuries—such as Khadija and 'A'isha, the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, Fatima, his beloved daughter, and Rabi'a, the Sufi par excellence of the eighth century.

Khadija, known in the Muslim tradition as Tahira (the Pure) and Kubra (the Great), was the first and most important wife of Muhammad, who remained monogamous during her lifetime. When Muhammad entered Khadija's life as a young man, she was an older widow who owned property and engaged in trade. She employed Muhammad to take her merchandise to Syria and was so impressed by how well he executed his commission and by his personality that she offered him marriage. Muhammad accepted. Khadija supported him in every way and stood by him through the most difficult times of his life. She was the first person to accept the authenticity of his prophetic mission, and the Prophet Muhammad continued till the end of his life to remember her with the deepest love, respect, and gratitude.

'A'isha, beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad, is very important in Muslim history not only because she became the Prophet's favorite wife after the death of Khadija but also because she is one of the major transmitters of the ahadith ascribed to him. According to a well-known saying, the Prophet said, "Learn half of the Deen (Principles of Faith) from me and the other half from 'A'isha." A multi-faceted, dynamic woman, 'A'isha is also to be remembered for her strong feminist consciousness, which is reflected in a number of her sayings.

Fatima, the youngest and only surviving child of the Prophet Muhammad and Khadija, is known in the Muslim tradition as Zahra (the Radiant One) and is greatly revered. She continued the bloodline of her father through her marriage to his cousin 'Ali, who is regarded as the first Imam of Shi'ite Muslims, who, after the Sunnis, are the most important sect in Islam. Fatima is the center of piety for many Muslims, who see her as a model to be emulated by all devout women.

Rabi'a's figure is shrouded in legends, including stories of miracles brought about by her intense devotion to God. But sketchy as the historical details of her life are, they point to an extraordinary personality. Probably a fourth (rabi'a) daughter, she was born into extreme poverty. Orphaned at a young age, she was sold into slavery for a paltry sum. She

served her master by the day but fasted much and spent most of the night in praying to God. Becoming aware of her profound piety, her master released her from bondage.

Among the devotees of Rabi'a, who lived a celibate, highly austere life, were spiritual and temporal leaders of her time. But though many sought her prayers or guidance, she solicited no help from anyone, including God. Her prayers, including the following, reflect her all-consuming passion for God, which makes even Heaven and Hell irrelevant: "O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty."

Rabi'a, the most outstanding Sufi saint in an age of saints, whose name has become a symbol for women who attain the highest spiritual station in any age, has been a source of inspiration to many mystics, including her biographer Farid-ud-din 'Attar who, in his famous poem "The Conference of the Birds," pays her the high compliment of being the Crown of Men (*Taj ar-Rijal*).

As I look back on my life's journey, I can identify some figures who have been a source of inspiration to me. Among them, perhaps none ranks higher than the poet-philosopher Iqbal, from whom I learned what I consider to be the core of the message of the Qur'an. The outstanding women of early Islam are also very important to me, as are the two real-life women who have had the greatest impact on me—my mother and my daughter. As I think about the debt I owe to those who have helped to shape my mind and soul and the course of my life, I remember my duty to present and future Muslim girls and women and renew my commitment to do what I can to help them achieve self-actualization. I have come a long way since my journey as a feminist theologian began in Stillwater in 1974. My Odyssean venture to make sense of my own life as a Muslim woman through my study of the sources of my religious tradition, history, and culture has taken me from one end of the world to the other. It was been a hard but rewarding quest, which goes on as the struggle to create a world free of injustice and inequity continues.

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