

# WOMEN'S INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

## **Introduction**

I feel very honoured to have been invited to be a speaker at this very important conference and to have the opportunity to explain to you not only how Muslim women are reinterpreting Islam, or reinterpreting the primary sources of Islam, but to explain to this diverse audience the importance of understanding Islam in the contemporary context, the issues, the problems, the prospects, the possibilities. As I speak to you, I am very much aware of the difficulties that are being faced today or that have arisen, as a new antagonism takes place between the so-called world of Islam and the West. There is a lot at stake here and so it is very vital to establish some basic understanding of what the issues are.

I don't want to say too much about my own background, but I do want to mention two things that I think are very relevant to what I have to say to you today. One, that I have been involved since 1974 in developing what is known in the West as feminist theology in the context of the Islamic tradition. Secondly, also since the 1970s, I have been very much involved in inter-religious dialogue, especially among "People of the Book" such as Jews, Christians and Muslims. I have a deep commitment both to dialogue, in the sense of a genuine encounter or "communication in the I/Thou mood" and also to the promotion of human rights, including, obviously, the rights of women.

## **An Exploration of Women's Issues**

I became involved in this journey of exploration into women's issues in 1974 almost accidentally. At that time, I was a faculty advisor to a group of Muslim students at Oklahoma State University at a place called Stillwater, Oklahoma. However, the journey that I started in that place has been anything but *still*. It was a

rule of the University that every student organization on the campus had to have a faculty advisor. That year I happened to be the only Muslim faculty member on campus, and so by default, I became the advisor to this group of Muslim students, all of whom were male Arabs from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It was a very patriarchal group. They were not too thrilled at my being their faculty advisor, but they didn't have much of a choice. This group also had a tradition of having an annual seminar at which the faculty advisor delivered a presentation. I happened to know that the faculty advisor could speak about any subject he chose, but in my case I was told that I had to speak about women in Islam. I felt somewhat affronted by this prescription, because I was not very much interested in that question at that time. But I accepted the invitation for two reasons. First, I was happy that this group had been forced by circumstances to have a woman speaker; they didn't even have a woman in the audience. So I thought it was a breakthrough that a woman speaker had to be invited.

But there was also another reason, a more important reason I believe, and that was that I had come across literally hundreds of publications on the subject of women in Islam, the role, the position, the status of women in Islam, virtually all of them written by Muslim men. It is a very popular subject with Muslim men, scholars and non-scholars. Of course, what I would like to do ideally, which is sort of a secret dream, is one day to write something on the status and position and role of Muslim men for men in Islam. I am concerned about the fact that no such publication exists and it seems to me that Muslim men have no role or position or status at all. And so perhaps I would like to return the courtesy.

I thought it would be interesting for a

woman to share a woman's perspective. Now I knew quite clearly what was expected of me; what these students wanted me to cover when they asked me to talk about women in Islam: the role, the responsibilities of mothers and wives and so on. I was determined I wasn't going to do that. What I tried to do instead was a focused study of the women-related passages in the Koran, which to Muslims is the primary source, the most authoritative source of Islam. Naturally, I had read the Koran many times; I used the Koran as a textbook in the courses I taught on Islam, but until that time, I had never done a systematic study of these passages. When I started to do that as a preparation, I became very angry on two accounts: one, that I began to see more and more clearly the wide discrepancy which exists between the Koranic statements, the Koranic attitude towards women, and what is actually happening to Muslim women or women in Muslim societies. Secondly, I began to see how many things had happened to me personally, because I had been born female in a Muslim society. So that's how the journey began. We are told that enlightenment brings endless bliss. That has not been my experience. The more I have continued to work in this area, the more troubled I have become. I don't have the time to tell you much more about my personal journey. All I want to say is that, for me, this whole search has never been just an academic exercise; it has always had the utmost existential necessity. It has always been a quest for truth and justice. That is the motivation that keeps me going, despite enormous difficulties.

Between 1974 and 1983-84, I was studying the Koranic passages relating to women and reinterpreting them, coming up with alternative interpretations. I wrote a monograph entitled "Women in the Koran" in which I dealt with all of these passages under various topics, such as women as mothers, wives, women in the conflicts concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, women as witnesses, etc.. I

was doing it mainly for myself, to make sense of my own life and my own culture and my own tradition. I did not think that this work had any relevance for anybody beyond myself.

### **Experiences in Pakistan**

However, in 1983 and 1984 something else occurred. I was on a sabbatical in Pakistan during this time, on a research fellowship, working on a project dealing with certain Koranic passages. Pakistan had had military rule for most of its existence. During this period in Pakistan, there was Islamization under the rule of General Zia ul-Haq. Law after law was either being promulgated or threatened to be promulgated which had visibly negative effects on women. For example, in 1979 the *Hudood* ordinance was passed. For certain crimes, the only admissible evidence is that of four Muslim men. This is not what the Koran prescribes, but this is what the *Hudood* says. This means, among other things, that if a woman is raped, her own evidence is not admissible. Not only were laws unfair to women being passed one after the other, but also there were many acts of brutality and violence against women. There was also an increase in anti-women literature, which was appearing everywhere.

As a result of all this, a feminist movement was born in Pakistan; in fact, for many years, it was very dynamic. Many of these women were heroic women, women with a lot of courage who took great personal risks and did everything that they could possibly do to protest against these obvious injustices. But these women were not very successful; the laws and everything else continued. At that point, some of these women activists who knew me and my work, which I had done very quietly for many years, came to me to ask for my help because, as far as they could tell, I was the only Muslim woman, at least in Pakistan, who was doing such theological research and they needed my help to refute some of the interpretations that were being used to justify these laws.

### **Approaches to the Problem**

That point was an historic moment in my life because I had to review everything, I had to rethink everything. Until that point, my journey, my quest had been a personal one, for myself. The whole situation had changed. I was being asked to provide an ideology for the women's movement, perhaps not only for Pakistan, but in general as well. This was a great responsibility; I had to rethink everything very carefully.

There was some additional studying to do. I spent that summer doing a very intensive study of the two most important books of *ahadith* which are the traditions attributed to the Prophet. I also studied the works of some Jewish and Christian feminists who have studied Biblical texts. At the end of this study, I felt that there were two ways to do my work. One was to try to provide an alternative interpretation to every verse that was being quoted; I could very easily come up with an alternative interpretation of cited verses which would lead to very different conclusions. For ten years, I had been doing precisely that. That was the easier way, to do it on a case-by-case basis. The other choice was to try to identify certain basic assumptions which exist in Muslim societies and Muslim culture which make it possible for both Muslim men and women to regard it as self-evident that men are superior to women or that women are inferior to men. After reflection, I decided to use the method of trying to identify the basic assumptions. Refuting it on a case-by-case basis would be endless.

It is imperative for Muslim women to undertake a study of the Koran, not only to know what is in the Koran, but to know what is not in the Koran. It is important, because when you have never studied it, people will simply say "it's in the Koran" and you have no way of knowing if they might be misleading you deliberately or unintentionally. So it is extremely important to know what is not in the Koran.

### **Methodology**

Another issue is methodology. In evolving and developing a methodology for interpreting the Koran, I did not have any models because nobody was trying to do the kind of thing that I am doing. I evolved three principles of interpretation. One is that of **linguistic accuracy**: to look at a term or a concept to try to find out by means of reference to all the classical lexicons, etc., what that word meant in the culture in which it was used, not what it means seven centuries, or ten centuries, or twenty centuries later, but what it meant in its original context.

Secondly, there is the **criterion of philosophical consistency**; if you want to know what the Koran says about creation, you look at all the creation accounts, not just one or two. If you are looking at how the Koran used the word "Adam" you look at all the contexts in which the word "Adam" occurs. So you see how the various uses of the words are philosophically consistent and not in opposition, because Muslims believe that the Koran is consistent; it does not contradict itself.

Third, I developed what I call the **ethical criterion**, which in some ways is the most important one. If you believe that the Koran is the word of God, which Muslims believe, then it must reflect the justice of God, because in the Koran, the justice of God is very highly stressed. If there is a particular passage in the Koran which seems to be unjust, even from a human standpoint, for example, it is justifying things such as slavery or victimization of one group, a minority group at the hands of the majority, such an interpretation does not reflect the justice of God, because over and above the Koran stands the author of the Koran, which is God. The Koran itself must be interpreted in the light of God's intention, which is always to do justice. Therefore, if there is any passage which seems to be unjust even from our human standpoint, we have to search to find a more just and equitable interpretation of it.

### **The Three Myths**

Every time you mention the issue of general equality in Islam, you have ten or twelve verses thrown in your face, particularly *Surat An-Nisa 4:34*, which starts with “men are good rulers over women”. But that is not the whole thing; if you deal sufficiently with these verses, then there are still others and then the *ahadith* and more and more *ahadith*—millions of *ahadith*!

Since then, I have been working on three assumptions or three myths, as I call them, which I believe are fundamental and foundational, not only in the Islamic tradition, but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions. These three assumptions are as follows:

1. that Adam is a male person, God’s primary creation and that from the rib of Adam, God created Eve, a woman, and that she is, therefore, secondary and derivative and not equal to him.
2. that though secondary in creation, woman is primary in guilt, as she got poor Adam thrown out of Paradise.
3. that not only was woman created *from* man, but that she was created *for* man, which makes her instrumental and not fundamental.

I believe that it is essential to deal with these three myths, if women in these three traditions are to be liberated. I am not saying that these myths are the sole cause of the oppression of women, certainly not. I am very well aware that there are a host of other things, many things—economic, political, social, cultural, etc.. But what I am saying is that these have been used endlessly in these traditions to justify the creation of a hierarchy in which woman is always at the bottom.

### **Equal Before Allah?**

I have been writing a book called *Equal before Allah?*, concerning the question of equality of men and women in the context of creation. I would like to share with you some of my research on the question of creation. In the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, there are two creation stories. One is Genesis 1:26-27 which says: “God

said, let us create Adam in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves and let them be masters of the fish and the sea. God created Adam in the image of himself, in the image of God he created it male and female, he created them.” It was confusing to read it in English because what is God creating, “him” or “them” or what, “male” or “female”? I’ll deal with this question in a moment.

There is a second creation story, in Genesis 2:18-24. This is a story that everybody in the world knows, that God created Adam, but poor Adam was lonely. God tried to find a companion, but did not have much luck at first. So God put Adam to sleep and then, out of the rib of Adam, God created Eve. And when Adam saw Eve he was delighted and exclaimed: “This at last is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh” and so on.

Now it was believed for a long time that the first five books of the Bible were written by the Prophet Moses. Biblical scholars no longer believe that these books were written either by him or by any one person. Different portions of the text are attributed to various writers; these two stories in chapter one and chapter two are attributed to two different writers. We do not know the names of these writers, so they are referred to by code names. The first one is called the priestly writer; this is a story that dates from the fifth century Before Christian Era (B.C.E.). The second story, the rib story, is attributed to a writer called the Yahwist writer belonging to a group of people called the Yahwists; Yahweh was the name for God. This story is dated tenth century B.C.E. Thus, this story is actually five hundred years earlier than the other story, even though it is put second in the Bible.

The two stories are quite different. I refer to chapter one, the first story. The confusion arises because Biblical translations make it appear that when it says, God said “let us create Adam,” that the reference here is to the creation of a male person called Adam. Then there is a tremendous amount of confusion, because if Adam is a male person, then why does it



say "God gave them dominion and made them male and female." The language of the Bible is, of course, Hebrew and in Hebrew the word "Adam" is not a proper name, it is a collective name and it means "the human being." So when it says, "God said let us create Adam", it means God is saying "let us create the human being." If you substitute "human being" for "Adam" in the text, there is no problem because what the first story is talking about is the creation of humanity by God, at the same time in the same manner. There is no hierarchy, no first creation and no second creation. That is, of course, not the way the story has been read, until very recently when the feminist ideologists reinterpreted it, but that is what a close textual analysis reveals.

The impact of the second story, the Yahweh story of the Christian tradition, is enormous, because this story has been used by writer after writer, by all the founders of the tradition to reduce woman to a lesser status than man. I will only quote one significant statement which is of enormous significance because it comes from St. Paul, who more than any other person is a builder of the Christian tradition. He says: "God is the source of Christ and God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of woman and for a man to pray with his head covered is a sign of disrespect for the source; for a woman, however, it is a sign of disrespect to her source if she prays unveiled."

In fact, according to St. Paul, a woman who will not wear a veil should have her hair cut off or her head shaved. If a woman is ashamed to have her hair cut off, she ought to wear a veil. Let me just say, you know many Muslim women think that veiling is a specifically Islamic issue. It certainly is not, because here you have St. Paul saying that if a woman will not wear a veil, she should have her head shaved, which was a sign that she was a harlot. So it is a very serious statement. He continues: "A man should certainly not cover his head since he is made in the image of God and reflects God's glory, but

woman is the reflection of man's glory. For man did not come from woman, but woman came from man; and man was not created for the sake of woman, but woman was created for the sake of man." Here is the creation of a hierarchy: God, Christ, man, woman and this hierarchy has stayed in place until the present time. The importance of it can not be overstated. When I started looking at the story of creation in the Koranic text, I first had to identify all the relevant text, because the Koran is not structured like the Bible. It is not chronological; the issue of creation is not found in chapter one. You have to look for all the creation passages and there are thirty of them. It is very important to note that in all of these passages, there are three generic terms used for humanity: *anas*, *bashar* and *al-insan*. None of them simply means "male person". In all these passages, it is stated very clearly that God created humanity. Sometimes the description is in evolutionary terms; sometimes it is described as what God said.

### **The Rib Story**

There are various styles, but there is no way that one could look at any of these thirty passages and find any mention of the rib story. Yet almost every Muslim that I have ever met believes the rib story. Whenever I ask "how was Eve created?" the answer comes back in a flash: from the rib of Adam. This is certainly not in the Koran. So where did they get the story from? I discovered when I was reading the *ahadith* that there are six which are considered to be next in authority only to the Koran itself, in which there is mention of the rib story. The two collections of *ahadith* are *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

I would like to read to you the text of these six traditions, just to give you an idea of what they are saying. Every tradition has two parts; the first one is called *isnad*, which is the list of names of people who have transmitted this *hadith*. Every list of names theoretically goes back to the Prophet.

The second part is called *matn*, which is the content of the *hadith*. The content says: "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 should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you would leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat woman nicely." The second one is: "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." Number three: "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt his neighbour. 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." These three are from *Sahih al-Bukhari*.

The next three are from *Sahih Muslim*.

Number four: "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." Number five:

"Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened by 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." The last one is: "Act kindly towards women, for woman is created from a rib and the most crooked part from 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."

Thus, the situation is that we have thirty Koranic passages which do not say anything about the rib, which is mentioned in the *ahadith*, but not the Koran. In fact, the Koranic passages don't even mention Adam and Eve. Adam is not an Arabic word; it's a Hebrew word co-opted in the Arabic language, which means "the human being". So, if "Adam" represents the human species, why should there be any Eve? The word "Adam" is

used 25 times in the Koran and 21 out of these 25 times, it is clearly a concept. When human beings reach the stage when they can be regarded as “God’s deputies on earth”, then the word “Adam” is used to refer to them. Four times it is referred to as the name of one of the prophets, but there is no statement in the Koran that Adam was the first male person created by God. But we have the rib story in the *ahadith* tradition. It is a fascinating study to figure out how this came about. I don’t have the answer to that; it needs a lot of research.

### **The Ahadith**

What happened in the history of Christianity is similar to what happened in the history of Islam. I believe that Jesus was a feminist, as Prof. Leonard Zwidler has demonstrated in his article called “Jesus was a feminist”. But the first interpreter of the Christian tradition was St. Paul, whose writing became the lens through which the primary Christian text was seen, which affected the development of Christianity.

In the case of Islam, the *Hadith* literature was the lens through which the Koranic text was itself read, so that the meaning of the Koran itself was distorted, because of the *ahadith*. Let me make some very important points here: it is the consensus of all the scholars of *Hadith* literature starting from Imam Bukhari, who is considered to be the greatest of the *ahadith* scholars, that the vast majority of all the *ahadith* are fictitious, are fabricated. Imam Bukhari examined tens of thousands of ahadith and authenticated fewer than three thousand, so this tells you what he thought about the majority of the *ahadith*. It is the consensus of all the scholars, of Imam Bukhari, of Professor Rahman, that most of them are fictitious. Nonetheless, they have contributed to the formative aspect of the Islamic tradition. The Islamic culture is far more derivative and dependent on *Hadith* literature than it is on the Koranic text, which is not how it supposed to be, but that is how it is. If most of the *ahadith* are not the words of

the Prophet, what are they? They represent Arabic culture of the 7th and 8th centuries. Islam, coming after Judaism and Christianity, as the youngest of these three religions has incorporated the biases of these earlier religions toward women. These biases, coupled with the pre-Islamic Arab-Bedouin biases and the destructive heritage of Greek dualism, which equated man with reason, equated woman with emotion, put reason above emotion; all of that fell into the basket of Islamic culture. We have inherited everybody else's biases. Theoretically, this problem of discrepancies should be a very easy thing to deal with, because there is a rule of interpretation which all Muslims accept: that in case of a conflict between the Koranic statements and the *ahadith*, the Koran always prevails. That is a clear Koranic statement. It cannot be overturned by a million *ahadith*, that is the rule. Theoretically, the presence of these *ahadith* should not have any negative effect, but this is not what has happened. In practice, what has happened is that things in the Koranic text have been misinterpreted, in the light of the *ahadith*. I will give you an example to show you the misuse of language. *Surat An-Nisa*, verse one, talks about the creation of women, of humanity. It says: "O mankind, (*an-nas*) be circumspect in keeping your duty to your Sustainer who created you (plural) from one being (*nafsin wahidatin*) and spread from her (*minha*) her mate (*zaujaha*) and spread from these two beings many men and women." These creation passages are saying that God created all of humanity from one single person, from one single soul or being. It so happens that in Arabic, every word is either feminine or masculine and "soul" or "being" happens to be feminine. What it says is, that God created you from one single person, created you like Nature made his mate, but since the noun is feminine, it literally says not his, but her mate. The Arabic word used in the text means her, not his. What is so astonishing is that there is not a single translation of the Koran in any

language which says that. This is an open challenge. I have seen about a hundred English translations, I have seen other translations and not a single one says that. Now how is it that these great scholars of Islam have improved the grammar of the Koran? How does the "her" become "his"? I am not arguing here that the first creation is female, not yet. But what I am saying is that linguistic gender should be translated correctly and it is not. It is very intriguing that I have read this verse hundreds of times before I noticed that myself because we get so used to reading it in a conditioned way.

Some anti-women scholars have said that, as in the Bible, woman is created from a rib, from a thirteenth rib, (an unlucky number), and not only that but from a left rib, (left is unlucky in Arab culture). There is, in fact, mention of woman having been created from a crooked rib, but Adam is not mentioned in any of these *ahadith* rib traditions.

We have thirty Koranic passages which confirm the equality of men and women. Then we have these *ahadith* which are contradictory to the Koran. In fact, in Muslim conscienceness the rib story has superseded the Koranic text. We definitely have to discard the incorrect *ahadith*, in accordance with Islamic principles of scholarship.

There are two statements that I think are important to help understand this problem. One is the statement by a philosopher who said: "Those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it". The second is a statement made to me by one of my Koranic teachers; he said: "If you are travelling on a train ... and you realize at some point that you have taken the wrong track 20 miles back and you want to get back on the right track, you can not do it at that point. You first have to go back to where you went wrong and then get on the right track."

### **Equal at the Creation**

The relevance is as follows: the creation issue is to me the most important issue, because if God created man and woman

equal or if man and woman were equal at the point of creation, then it can not be God's will or design or purpose that they should become unequal in any human society, as God created them equal and God is the giver of ultimate value. If they have become unequal, as they have in virtually every human society, this can not be said to be the will of God.

On the other hand, if God created man and woman unequal, as has been the contention of these traditions, then trying to make them equal, as some "perverse" feminists and others are trying to do, can not be in accordance with the will of God. The basic question is did God create them equal or not? I think it is important for women to realize that if they want to get back on track, they have to realize that the point at which they got derailed was right at the beginning.

### **The Koran: An Open Text**

My friends who were trying to combat major problems said to me, "We want some real help and here you are talking about Adam and Eve." I told them that one day they would understand the importance of going back to the beginning. Once we do that, then we can establish a theological framework within which we can fight for human rights. Without the framework, we really have no hope. I think it is very important to understand that Muslims are

fundamentally people of the Book. To them, the Koranic text is of basic importance. That is the only reason I can do anything at all, because some people have profound contempt for me because I am a woman, I have been educated in Western institutions, and I live in the West. A lot of people do listen because I speak out of the Koran, which is the only claim I have to any kind of authority. What I am saying is that the Koran is an open book. The Koran, like the Bible, is written in a Semitic language, which works in terms of roots. If you want to know what a word means, you have to know the root of the word. As there is not any root in these languages that has only one meaning, the Koranic verses are open to multiple interpretations. I think that it is enormously important to present this possibility to both Muslim women and men because, for at least a thousand years, Muslims have been told by those people who have taken over the custodianship of the Islamic tradition that the Koran is a closed text, that everything is fixed. My argument is that it is not fixed, it is an open text. Therefore as M. Iqbal said: "The Koran is an open text and every generation of Muslims has a right to reinterpret it." But human rights are never given, they have to be taken. We Muslims have to take the right to reinterpret the Koran.

"Women's Interpretation of Islam," in *Women and Islam in Muslim Societies* (No. 7 in *Poverty and Development - Analysis and Policy Series*), edited by Hans Thijssen and Judith Saffe, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, The Hague, The Netherlands, April 1994, pp. 113-121