

IN THE NAME OF GOD: A LETTER TO MUSLIMS, JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

“Bismil-laah ir Rahmaan ir Raheem” (In the Name of God, the Most Merciful and Gracious, the Most Compassionate and the Dispenser of Grace)

“As- salaamu ‘alay-kum” (Peace be unto all of you)

This “group” letter that I, a Muslim woman, have been honored to write, is addressed, first and foremost, to Jews, Christians and Muslims who cherish their respective religious traditions. It is written at a time when our world is bitterly-divided, when extremism, bigotry and hatred are leading to horrendous acts of terror, brutality and destruction. Violence has become so rampant in our times that it has benumbed our sensitivities in varying degrees. Nonetheless, recent events such as the shooting at the Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan, of 132 children, ranging from the age of 8 to 18, by the Tehrik-i-Taliban (December 16, 2014), and the attack on the Charlie Hebdo weekly newspaper in Paris by the Al-Qaeda Branch in Yemen, which resulted in 12 deaths (January 7, 2015) have caused massive shock-waves throughout the world. Such acts of bestiality indicate, without any doubt whatever, that something is dreadfully wrong with the state of the world in which we are living. The fact that the gunmen were shouting “*Allahu Akbar*” (*God is the Greatest*) as they went about killing their victims, further demonstrates the depravity of those who invoked the name of God Who is “*Rahmaan*” and “*Raheem*” – terms which signify the highest degree of Mercy, Compassion and Grace. Surah 5: *Al-Maa’idah*:32 - reiterates a command given to “the children of Israel” (which is also applicable to Christians and Muslims), namely, that the unjust killing of one human being is tantamount to the slaying of all humanity, whereas saving the life of one human being is like saving the life of all humankind.

The current situation raises questions that are profoundly troubling to many people. They are - or should be - particularly troubling to Muslims, Christians and Jews who believe that God’s Spirit has been breathed into them which makes them the recipients of special capabilities as well as responsibilities. Muslims have been told by the Qur’an which they regard as the Word of God, that human beings have been appointed “*khala’if al-‘ard*” (*God’s vicegerents on earth*) who must take care of the earth which sustains us. They are also commanded to strive to develop their potentialities to the fullest having been created by God “in the finest configuration” (Surah 95:

At-Tin: 3), being ever-mindful of the Qur'anic world-view enshrined in the resounding words of Surah 53: *An-Najm*: 43: "Towards God is your limit" which are embodied in the beloved Islamic tradition: "Create in yourselves the attributes of God."

God has many attributes. Islamic mystics often talk about God's ninety-nine Names each of which has a particular signification. Which of God's many attributes should Muslims, Jews and Christians strive to inculcate in themselves? There are diverse, even opposing, schools of thought or theological perspectives in our three religious traditions. However, central to the concept, as well as the experience, of God in the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is that God is Merciful and Compassionate. This means that all of God's actions, all of the ways in which God responds to us, are marked by mercy. So that even when God has to judge and take action, those judgments and actions will be merciful.

Here, it is apt to state that in the Qur'an which puts great emphasis on God's Justice, differentiates between two kinds of justice. One kind is called "*adl*" which means "*to be equal, neither more nor less.*" Explaining this concept, A. A. A. Fyzee states: "In a court of Justice the claims of the two parties must be considered evenly, without undue stress being laid upon one side or the other." Evenly-balanced scales are the emblems of "*adl*" or legalistic justice.

The second kind of justice enjoined by the Qur'an is called "*ehsaan*" which literally means "*restoring the balance by making up a loss or deficiency.*" In order to understand this concept it is important to know that the Qur'an envisages the ideal society or community as "*ummah*" which derives from the word "*umm*" (*mother*). The symbols of a mother and motherly love and compassion are also linked with the two attributes most characteristic of God, namely "*Rahmaan*" and "*Raheem*" from the root "*R-H-M*" (womb) common to Arabic and Hebrew. The ideal "*ummah*" cares about all its members just as an ideal mother cares about all her children, knowing that they are not equal in all respects and have different needs. While showing undue favor to any child would be unjust, a mother who takes into account the special needs of a child who is challenged in some way, does not act unjustly, she exemplifies the spirit of "*ehsaan*" or compassionate justice by helping to restore the balance with regards to this child. That God is always Just is unequivocally affirmed by the Qur'an, but every Surah

(except one) begins with the words “*Bismil-laah ir Rahmaan ir Raheem*” (*In the Name of God, the Most Merciful and Gracious, the Most Compassionate and the Dispenser of Grace*). This invocatory prayer is repeated by Muslims not only when they recite the Qur’an but prior to the start of any important activity in their daily lives.

In the context of God’s Mercy, there are two remarkable verses (12 and 54) in Surah 6: *Al-An’am* which deserve particular attention. Verse 12 reads:

Say: “Unto whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth?” Say: “Unto God, who has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy.”

Verse 54 reads:

And when those who believe in Our messages come unto thee, say: “Peace be upon you. Your Sustainer has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy.”

With reference to these two verses, it has been pointed out by the eminent Muslim scholar Muhammad Asad in his translation and explanation of the Qur’an, that “the expression ‘God has willed upon Himself as a law’ (*kataba ‘ala nafsihi*) occurs in the Qur’an only twice - and in both instances with reference to His grace and mercy (*rahmah*); none of the other divine attributes has been similarly described. This exceptional quality of God’s grace and mercy is further stressed in Surah 7: *Al-A’raf*: 156: ‘My grace overspreads everything’ - and finds an echo in the authentic Tradition in which according to the Prophet (Muhammad), God says of Himself, ‘Verily, My grace and mercy outstrips My wrath’ (Bukhari and Muslim).” (*The Message of the Qur’an*)

The theme of God’s Mercy which is universal and without boundaries is one of the grandest themes of the Qur’an. This theme finds many expressions. For instance: Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah* states in verse 185: “God wills that you shall have ease, and does not will you to suffer hardship,” and in verse 286: “God does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear;” Surah 3: *Al-Imran*: states in verse 74: “God is limitless in His great bounty,” and in verse 150: “God is your protector and He is the best of helpers;” Surah 4: *An-*

Nisaa' states in verses 25-28: "God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace...God wants to turn to you in His mercy...God wants to lighten your burdens;" and in verse 64: "God is Oft-returning, Most Merciful;" Surah 5: *Al-Maa'idah*: 7 states: "God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but wants to make you pure, and to bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings;" and Surah 6: *Al-An'am* 147 states: "Limitless is your Sustainer in His grace."

God's Mercy to humankind is also powerfully illustrated in the Qur'an in verses which are of foundational significance in Islamic mysticism. For instance: Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 186 which states: "If My servants ask thee about Me - behold, I am near: I respond to the call of him who calls, whenever He calls unto Me;" Surah 27: *An-Naml*: 62 asks a rhetorical question: "Who is it that responds to the distressed when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill (that caused the distress), and has made you inherit the earth?"; Surah 40: *Ghafir*: 60 states: "Your Sustainer says: 'Call unto Me, (and) I shall respond to you!'" and Surah 50: *Qaf*:16 points to the closeness between the Creator and humanity: "Verily, it is We who have created man, and We know what his innermost self whispers within him: for We are closer to him than his neck-vein."

God's Mercy, Compassion and Grace are stressed as much in the sacred texts of Jews and Christians - the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament - as they are in the Qur'an. Some of the references to God's Mercy in the Hebrew Bible are more detailed than others, as, for instance, *Psalms* 103 on "God is Love" states in verses 8-12: "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will He keep his anger forever. He has not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Reference to God's abundant and everlasting Mercy are found in many *Psalms* (e.g. 23: 6; 25: 6-7; 31: 7; 36: 5; 37:26; 40: 11-12; 51: 1-2; 52: 8; 57: 9-11; 86: 5; 86: 5; 100: 5; 103: 8-12; 106: 1; 107: 1; 109: 26-27; 115: 1; 118: 1- 4 and 29; 119: 64; 130: 7; 136: 1; 145: 8-9) as well as in other texts in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. *Exodus* 34: 6-7; *Numbers* 14: 18; *Deuteronomy* 4: 31; *1 Kings* 8: 23; *Nehemiah* 9: 27; *1 Chronicles* 16: 34; *2 Chronicles* 30: 9; *Isaiah* 30: 18, 49: 13, and 54: 8; *Jeremiah* 3: 12; *Lamentations* 3: 22-23 and 32; *Daniel* 9: 9; *Hosea* 2: 23; *Joel* 2: 12-13; and *Micah* 7: 18)

For Christians, in addition to the strong affirmations of God's Mercy, Compassion, Grace and Loving-kindness in the Hebrew Bible read and revered by many of them, there are numerous New Testament statements which reiterate the same core belief. Jesus makes the Mercy of God a mirror for his disciples, as *Luke* 6: 36 points out: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." The pivotal role of God's Mercy and Grace is emphasized in the accounts of the life of Jesus, the acts of his apostles as well as in the epistles included in the New Testament. In this context, reference may be made, for instance, to *Matthew* 5: 7; *Luke* 1: 50 and 78; *The Acts of the Apostles* 20: 24; *Romans* 5: 8 and 15, 6: 15, 9: 22-24, and 12:1; *1 Corinthians* 10: 13; *2 Corinthians* 1: 3; *Ephesians* 2: 4-7; *Colossians* 3: 12-13; *2 Timothy* 1:9; *Titus* 2: 11, and 3: 5; *Hebrews* 4: 16; *James* 2: 13; *1 Peter* 1: 3, and 5: 10; and *2 Peter* 3: 9.

While remembrance of God's Mercy, Compassion and Grace would be a source of deep solace and succor to believers in the Islamic, Jewish and Christian traditions, why have I devoted so much time to this theme in a letter written in the context of an interfaith dialogue on human sexuality? The answer to this question lies in what I have learnt in more than four decades of my life both in the classroom and in the larger world. I began my career as a feminist theologian in 1974, and my engagement in interfaith dialogue in 1979, and in both areas was - for many years - a solitary Muslim woman confronted with formidable challenges. Of these challenges there is one that I would like to mention here since it concerns the issues of human dignity and human sexuality which constitute the theme of this dialogue.

On the basis of my faith as well as my research, I had come to believe that according to the normative teachings of the Qur'an - the highest authority in Islam - women and men were equal in the sight of God. But where was this equality to be found in the world? Growing up in Pakistan's patriarchal culture which was exacerbated by feudalism and tribalism, I was intensely aware of the injustice, oppression and suffering to which the vast majority of girls and women in my society were subjected. It was regarded as self-evident in this society - as well as in Muslim communities world-wide - that women are inferior and subordinate to men. With the "Islamization" that took place in the Muslim world in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, negative ideas and attitudes toward women became institutionalized through the promulgation and implementation of manifestly anti-women laws. The challenge that arose for

me as a Muslim woman theologian-activist was how to bridge the huge gulf between God's compassion toward girls and women (as toward all marginalized people) and concern about safeguarding their fundamental rights, and the actual life-situation of a large number of Muslim women who constituted perhaps the most disadvantaged minority in the world.

Since Muslims are profoundly "*People of the Book*" i.e. the Qur'an, it became a major part of my task as a feminist theologian to analyze Qur'anic texts pertaining to women-related issues. Interpretations of these texts had been done almost exclusively by Muslim men, Muslim women - like Jewish and Christian women before them - having little or no opportunity to acquire knowledge of their own religious texts. This meant that the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women had been defined by men many of whom had a markedly patriarchal mind-set. In order to do an exegesis or interpretation of women-related Qur'anic texts from a non-patriarchal (or feminist) perspective, I had to develop my own hermeneutics or methodology of interpretation. Since the Qur'an is in Arabic which (like Hebrew) is a Semitic language in which each word has a root which has multiple meanings, the criteria of linguistic accuracy and philosophical consistency were an important part of my hermeneutics. Linguistic accuracy referred to determining what particular words meant in 7th century Hijaz where the Qur'an was revealed, Philosophical consistency referred to the analysis of particular terms which occurred in multiple contexts. (e.g. "*Adam*" which occurs 25 times in the Qur'an) to determine if there was consistency (or otherwise) in their usage.

In addition to the above criteria, there was a third one - I called it "the ethical criterion" - which I considered to be the most important part of my hermeneutics. Muslims regard the Qur'an as "the Word of God" which is the last and final authority in all matters. However, I believe that over and beyond "the Word of God" is God, that in order to understand "the Word of God" one must take into account the intention of the Author, namely, God. In my view what lies at the core of the Qur'an is its ethical framework or a set of moral principles which enable human beings to fulfil the categorical imperative mandated by God, namely, "*al - 'amr bi'l ma 'roof wa'n nahy 'ani'l munkar*" (to enjoin the doing of what is good or right and to forbid the doing of what is evil or wrong).

I see ethics as central not only to the Islamic, but also to the Jewish and Christian, religious

world-views. In my study of the prophetic figures at the start and heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam - Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad - I have been particularly struck by two distinctive characteristics which they had in common. The first was their absolute faith in, and submission to, God Who was Most Merciful, Most Compassionate, and Most Gracious, and the second was their deep spirituality from which flowed a morality that embodied the most important attributes of God. The example of the prophetic figures I have mentioned is very different from what we find in much of human history or the history of religion in general, where the law of the jungle - "Might is Right"- has been far more dominant than the moral edicts of God Who is Most Merciful, Most Compassionate. This is true even in the case of the three Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - in which the passionate moral impulse of their originators receded to the background as these faiths became institutionalized religions more concerned with strengthening and protecting their respective territories, than in establishing just and compassionate communities.

In recent decades, the rapid increase in extremism particularly in militant groups engaged in horrendous crimes, has led to stigmatization of Islam since many of the terrorists identify themselves as Muslims. I define a Muslim as one who lives according to the will and pleasure of God, Who is "*Rahmaan*" and "*Raheem*". According to this definition those who act in violation of God's most essential attributes and moral imperatives cannot be considered Muslim, and those who aggress upon the rights of others must be regarded as aggressors who have placed themselves outside the boundaries of God-centered religions.

Pakistan, my country of origin, has had more terror-attacks than any other country. I am sick at heart when I think of how Malala was shot (but saved through God's Mercy) and 132 innocent school-children murdered in cold blood just a short time ago. I mourn for those who have been killed and am outraged at the total inhumanity of the killers. But I feel a compelling need to tell the world that the goals which motivate those who commit the most heinous of sins and crimes, have nothing to do with Islam. Muslims, like Christians and Jews, and adherents of other religions, have human flaws and shortcomings. But it is important to remember at a time like this that belief in God as "*Rahmaan*" and "*Raheem*" is the foundation on which the lives of tens of millions of Muslims are built. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world are as different from Tehrik-e-Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the terror outfit which has the audacity to call

itself Islamic State, as their Christian brothers and sisters were from the Nazis.

Islam, Christianity and Judaism, like many other religions, have several dimensions including the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, social and political. Within its own sphere of applicability, each dimension offers what is meaningful and important to those who are committed to these traditions. But the history of these traditions shows that there have been times when a particular dimension acquires dominance while another becomes less important. In today's world, for instance, frequent references are made to "Political Islam" or the politicization of Islam. It is my considered judgment that in the context of the current state of our world which is grappling with many life-and-death issues, it is the ethical dimension of religion which is the most crucial. It is needed not only for establishing the parameters within which these issues should be examined, but also for keeping the focus on what is beneficial or harmful for human beings. My judgment is based upon my life experience as a feminist theologian- activist. I am taking the liberty of sharing this experience briefly below because it illustrates how ethics can be utilized to empower those who are marginalized and disadvantaged, and also to arouse the consciousness and conscience of those who discriminate against them.

For the past forty years I have sought to demonstrate, first to Muslim women and then to the communities in which they live, that according to the Qur'an, God has given them their fundamental human rights which cannot be abolished by any individual, group or agency. I have traveled through the world on a mission to educate Muslim girls and women about normative Islamic teachings enshrined in the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet of Islam, which relate to all aspects of their life. Difficult and dangerous as this mission has been I have always believed that this was the only way for me to bring about the internal and external empowerment of Muslim women.

Here I would like to mention that a very large number of Muslim women have three characteristics - they are poor, illiterate and live in a rural environment. The lives of many of them are fraught with every kind of hardship. However, their faith in God does not waver and Islam continues to sustain them. It also constrains them since they are conditioned to believe that Islam requires them to obey and serve men. I have had the experience of addressing all kinds and classes of Muslim women in all sorts of settings globally, and making them aware of basic

Qur'anic ethics, such as their right to life, education, freedom, physical well-being, and socio-economic justice, and of pointing out to them that the restrictions imposed on them in the name of Islam are cultural and not God-sanctioned. I know that my words reached many women - I saw their eyes and souls light up as they began to see that it is God's will and desire that they should engage in "*jihad fi sabil Allah*" (*striving in the cause of God*) for their liberation from the shackles that bind them. Muslim women who are empowered by the ethics of the Qur'an to strive for their own self-actualization, often become the catalysts for the moral development of the cultures in which they live.

As a university professor of religious studies with a special interest in issues related to women and gender, I had done substantial study of human sexuality in the context of the world's major religions. However, prior to being asked to participate in this dialogue and to write this "group" letter, I had not done a focused study of, or reflection on, the issue of homosexuality in general, or in the particular context of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It had always seemed to me to be a very complicated subject. My long struggle to build a solid theological case for women's equality with men in the Islamic tradition, and to demonstrate that since women and men were equal in the sight of God, they also had to be equal in society, had been filled with difficult challenges which had taken a heavy toll from me in many ways.

It made me happy to see that Muslim women in general had made much progress since 1974 when I began my work in Islamic theology of women, but I could not forget the fact that there were still very large groups of Muslim women in the world who lacked knowledge of their God-given rights and were unable to stand up and be counted in their patriarchal communities. At seventy-one I wanted to be free of the fray in which I had been engaged for four decades, and to focus on my own inner journey. But how could I abandon the cause that had been my life's most passionate quest? I felt that I still had a lot of work to do - and prayed to God to heal and strengthen my physical self so that I could continue the struggle.

When I received Rev. Anna Karin Hammar's invitation to speak at this dialogue I did not know, at first, how to respond. She was very gracious and understanding - she knew that being a feminist theologian in Muslim culture had already put me in jeopardy in a number of ways. She did not want to add to my life's difficulties and would have been understanding if I had sent her

my regrets. But there was something - perhaps her loving thoughts and trust in me, perhaps something in my own deeper psyche - that made me feel that an extraordinary thing had happened. As an academic I was greatly daunted by the task knowing that I had not done an adequate study of the issue of homosexuality in terms of all the pertinent religious texts, or of the increasing body of literature by writers from a large variety of disciplines. However, I felt called to accept Anna Karin's invitation, and to embark on a new journey.

In the short time that I had at my disposal before going to Sweden for the meeting, I began a course of intensive study of important books and articles. I also sought the guidance of my learned friends who specialized in Jewish and Christian sources and interfaith dialogue, and those who gave me spiritual direction through meditation and prayer. At the conclusion of this process, I sat down to write this letter not with any definite outline in front of me but with the prayer "*Bismil-laah ir Rahmaan ir Raheem*" (*In the Name of God, the Most Merciful and Gracious, the Most Compassionate and the Dispenser of Grace*), trusting that God would show me the way to say what I should say.

The theme of this dialogue is human sexuality which has been the subject of much debate in most religious traditions, including those of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A look at the history of how human sexuality has been viewed, from older religious traditions (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism) to later ones (e.g. Christianity, Islam), shows attitudes ranging from highly positive to highly negative. Sexuality, which is in its broadest sense refers to the "quality of being sexual" is regarded affirmatively by the Jewish and Islamic traditions because the creation of human beings as sexual as well as sexually- differentiated creatures is believed to be an integral part of God's plan for humankind. Unlike dualistic traditions, whether religious or philosophical, these traditions do not see sexuality as the opposite of spirituality. However, views about sexuality found in the Christian tradition appear to be very different from, and far more complex than, those found in the Jewish and Islamic traditions.

It is important to have an understanding of how sexuality has been seen by the Islamic, Jewish and Christian traditions in the context of heterosexual marriage prior to looking at the views of homosexual relations found in these traditions. Both the Islamic and the Jewish traditions are highly affirming of heterosexual marriage. The Qur'an encourages all Muslims who are able and

willing, to marry a “virtuous” or “chaste” man or woman, regardless of the difference in status or wealth between them.” It describes marriage as a “sign” of God’s mercy and bounty to humanity, as Surah 30: *Ar-Rum*: 21 states: “And among His (God’s) signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you might find restfulness (and satisfaction), and He has engendered between you love and mercy: surely, in that are signs for people who think.” While in traditional Judaism, marriage is viewed as a contractual bond commanded by God in which a man and a woman come together and create a relationship in which God is directly involved (*Deuteronomy* 24:1), in Islam marriage is regarded as a social contract based on the mutual agreement of the two spouses. Though marriage is not regarded either as a sacrament or as a covenant in Islam, the Qur’an refers to it as “a most solemn and serious pledge” (Surah 4: *An-Nisaa*: 21).

It has been pointed out by many scholars of religion that heterosexual marriage has not been viewed positively in the Christian tradition since the earliest days of the church. Karen Armstrong, eminent historian of religion, pointing out that celibacy was seen as “the prime Christian vocation” states:

Jesus has urged his followers to leave their wives and children (*Luke* 14:25-26). St. Paul, the earliest Christian writer, believed that because Jesus was about to return and inaugurate the Kingdom of God, where there would be no marriage or giving in marriage, it was simply not worth saddling yourself with a wife or husband. This, Paul was careful to emphasize, was simply his own opinion, not a divine ruling. It was perfectly acceptable for Christians to marry if they wished, but in view of the imminent second coming, Paul personally recommended celibacy. The fathers of the church often used these New Testament remarks to revile marriage...(but) accepted - albeit grudgingly - that marriage was part of God’s plan. St. Augustine taught that originally in the Garden of Eden, married sex had been rational and good. But after the fall, sexuality became a sign of humanity’s chronic sinfulness, a raging and ungovernable force, a mindless, bestial enjoyment of the creature that held us back from the contemplation of God. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin fused sexuality and sin indissolubly in the imagination of the Christian west. For centuries this tainted the institution of matrimony. Augustine saw his conversion to Christianity as a vocation of celibacy...His teacher, St. Ambrose of Milan, believed that “virginity is the one thing that keeps us from the

beasts”. The North African theologian Tertullian equated marriage with fornication. “It is not disparaging wedlock to prefer virginity,” wrote St. Jerome. “No one can compare two things if one is good and the other evil.”... Martin Luther, who left his monastery to marry, inherited Augustine’s bleak view of sex. “No matter what praise is given to marriage,” he wrote, “I will not concede that it is no sin.” Matrimony was a “hospital for sick people.” It merely covered the shameful act with a veneer of respectability, so that “God winks at it.” Calvin was the first western theologian to praise marriage unreservedly, and thereafter Christians began to speak of “holy matrimony.” The present enthusiasm for “family values” is, therefore, relatively recent. In the Roman Catholic church, however, priests are still required to be celibate, and whatever the official teaching about the sanctity of marriage, the ban on artificial contraception implies that sex is only legitimate when there is a possibility of procreation. For most of its history, Christianity has had a more negative view of heterosexual love than almost any other major faith. (“Not-so-holy matrimony,” in *The Guardian*, 29 June, 2003).

Having looked briefly at attitudes toward heterosexual marriage in the general historical context of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, I would like to point out that all three religious traditions developed in patriarchal cultures which colored their views regarding women. Almost three decades ago in trying to understand why so many Muslims, Christians and Jews believed that women were inferior and subordinate to men, I had identified three foundational theological assumptions in which this belief is rooted. These three assumptions are: (1) that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib, hence 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.

My research has demonstrated that the above assumptions are completely unwarranted in the light of the Qur’anic teachings relating to women. A number of Christian and Jewish feminist scholars have challenged the traditional interpretations of the Genesis texts which have been cited in support of these assumptions. Our collective work has certainly made a difference in

academic discourse relating to the issue of woman-man equality in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. It has also been a source of enlightening and empowering many women and men who believe that the spirit of God has been breathed equally into all human beings. Not only are all human beings essentially equal in terms of their creation, they are also equal recipients of a great gift conferred by God, the Most Merciful and Compassionate Creator and Sustainer of the universe. In one of its most beautiful and powerful verses (Surah 17: *Al-'Israa'*: 70), the Qur'an cites God's resounding proclamation: "Now, indeed, We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam."

The scholarly repudiation of theological assumptions which have been used by the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions for centuries to reduce women systematically to a less-than-fully-human status, denying their equality and dignity, is certainly to be celebrated. However, what is to be done about the troubling fact that in actual life, many Muslims, Christians and Jews continue to regard the inferiority and subordination of women to men as self-evident? Dualistic thinking which viewed the world as consisting of two fundamentally different entities - mind and matter - deifying the former while denigrating the latter, identified men with mind and spirit and women with base corporeality. This thinking which permeated many religious and philosophical traditions, doing untold damage to women through the ages, is still affecting the mind-set of many Christians, Jews and Muslims though they may not always be conscious of this.

The Islamic tradition inherited not only the anti-women biases present in Christianity and Judaism, but also those predominant in pre-Islamic Bedouin culture. In this culture there was a concept of "honor" which belonged only to men but could be put in jeopardy by women if their behavior, especially in a sexual context, was regarded as inappropriate. Since 1999 I have been involved in a building an international coalition against "honor killings" of girls and women, especially in Pakistan which is, most unfortunately, the world's leading country in such brutal crimes. My study of "crimes of honor" made me realize how pre-Islamic ideas of "honor" which had been totally rejected by Islam had become a part of Muslim culture in general. Amnesty International pointed out that in Pakistan "honor crimes" were supported by many people including those responsible for the enforcement of law and justice. In my strenuous campaign against the mutilation and murder of a large number of girls and women, I utilized whatever facts I could gather about particular crimes, but in the end I had to remind not only the criminals but

also those who promoted and supported them that they were violating God's essential attributes of Mercy, Compassion and Justice, and would have to account for their actions on the Day of Judgment.

My primary reason for doing a brief overview of attitudes toward human sexuality that have figured prominently in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, is to point toward the deep biases that come to the fore as one delves into the subject. The discrimination, defamation and disclamation that is being felt today by our homosexual brothers and sisters in many communities, has been experienced for centuries by women in heterosexual marriages whether they were seen in positive terms (as in the Jewish and Islamic traditions) or negatively (as in much of the Christian tradition). All major religious traditions have developed in patriarchal cultures where men were in power and in a position to degrade women. Patriarchy does not hold sway in the same way today as it did in earlier times - at least in a number of western societies. However, the bitter fact remains that there is inequality in power between those who hold authority in religious matters in most traditions and those who do not. This inequality leads to oppression which cannot be deemed to be pleasing to God Who is Most Merciful, Compassionate and Just.

Historically, there were a number of reasons including biological, psychological, socio-cultural, economic, and political, for the lower status of women in most Christian, Jewish and Muslim societies. However, the most deadly justification that was given to justify women's degradation was in religious terms, as my analysis of the three foundational assumptions in the foregoing narrative shows. With reference to our homosexual sisters and brothers, there are two main reasons that are generally given to justify the negativity shown toward them. The first which, in my opinion, is the more important one, is "religious" while the second one focuses on what is "natural." Often-times the two reasons are used in conjunction. My brief remarks about these two reasons are given below.

Jews, Christians and Muslims who reject homosexuality on religious grounds cite texts from their respective scriptures. While Jews cite texts from the Hebrew Bible and Muslims from the Qur'an, Christians cite texts from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Jewish texts used most often to condemn homosexuality are found in *Leviticus* 18: 22 and 20: 13. In the

judgment of my friend Professor Dr. Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, Dutch-American theologian and Presbyterian minister, teaching at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the Christian text which contains “the strongest condemnation of same-sex relations both women and men found anywhere in the Bible” is in the letter of St. Paul to the Church in Rome contained in *Romans* 1: 18-32 (*Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005).

The texts which Muslims use in condemnation of homosexuality are taken from the story of Prophet Lut (Lot) in the Qur’an, and are found in Surah 7: *Al-‘A‘raf*: 80-81; Surah 11: *Hud*: 77-79; Surah 15: *Al-Hijr*: 67-72; Surah 21: *Al-Anbiyaa*: 71, 74; Surah 26: *Ash-Shu‘araa*: 165-168; Surah 27: *An-Naml*: 54-55; Surah 29: *Al-‘Ankabut*: 28-29. Another verse sometimes cited in this context is Surah 4: *An-Nisaa*: 14-15.

Much has been written about the above texts, especially in recent years as traditional interpretations have been challenged by modern scholars who believe that their religious traditions which have unilaterally condemned homosexuality need to be reformed. Knowing that scriptural texts have been hugely influential in molding societal attitudes toward homosexuality, reformist thinkers of varying quality have analyzed these texts in a variety of ways. Some have pointed out the intricacies of the language of these texts and sought to show that other - and better - interpretations of these texts should be considered, Others have referred to a number of factors such as historical, sociological, political and philosophical which should be re-visited to arrive at interpretations which are more in line with modern religious consciousness.

In an article entitled, “Who says homosexuality is a sin?” Josh Gould cites an ancient quote by Rabbi Meir Baal Hanes: “Any interpretation of scripture which leads to hatred or disdain of other people is illegitimate.” In the same vein, Karen Armstrong, the moving spirit behind the worldwide launching of a Charter of Compassion in November 2009, has stated: “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, of self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology.” (*The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*)

Being a Muslim and coming from a tradition which regards a Book - the Qur'an - as its highest source, I know the vital importance of scriptural texts in the lives of believers. When I began my Odyssean venture to develop the discipline of feminist theology in Islam, I knew that in order to win the battle for the recognition of Muslim women's God-given rights, each Qur'anic verse which was cited to negate these rights would have to be challenged and reinterpreted. As I write this letter I am all-too-aware of the fact that a similar battle will have to be fought with regards to the scriptural texts that are cited against homosexuality in the Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions. In this letter I did not want to engage in the analysis of these texts because there is neither time nor space here for such an involved exercise. Furthermore, I have learnt from my 35 years of engagement in Jewish- Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue in which doing comparative analysis of our scriptural texts was a central pre-occupation, that though this exercise could be a source of surprise and knowledge-enhancement for some participants, it leads more often to theological wrangling than to a deepening of compassion for persons of other faiths.

I do not envisage the struggle to liberate scriptural texts from traditional, negative interpretations to be an easy matter for Jews, Christians and Muslims. In fact, having trodden this path I know how hard it is. Nonetheless I encourage reformist scholars in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions to follow the example of the Muslim modernist reformers of the last two centuries whose rallying cry was "Back to the Qur'an, forward with '*Ijtihad*'." What they meant by this was that they had to purge their traditions of all those elements which had overlaid and obscured the divine imperatives enshrined in the Qur'an. "Back to the Qur'an" was the search for the ethical principles which reflected God's essential attributes, and "Forward with '*Ijtihad*'" (which means "independent reasoning") indicated that they would use their reason (which according to the Qur'an is God's special gift to humanity) to implement these principles to create God-centered societies.

I would like to share with modern Muslims the wisdom of poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, the most outstanding Muslim thinker since the death of Jalaluddin Rumi in 1273, who has had a formative influence on my life and work. Noting that "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,” Iqbal made a statement of extraordinary significance: “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.”

The second reason cited by those who oppose homosexuality, both on religious and secular grounds, is that it is not in accordance with “nature.” This viewpoint is being challenged by an increasing number of people from different disciplines and vocations, largely on the basis of new developments in science and understandings of human personality. In this discussion reference is sometimes made to the “old brain” and the “new brain” which co-exist uneasily in today’s human beings. In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen Armstrong describes the evolution of the latter from the former and what this means in the modern way of life. She states:

There is no doubt that in the deepest recess of their minds, men and women are indeed ruthlessly selfish. This egotism is rooted in the “old brain” which was bequeathed to us by the reptiles that struggled out of the primal slime some 500 million years ago. Wholly intent on personal survival, these creatures were motivated by mechanisms that neuroscientists have called the “Four Fs”: feeding, fighting, fleeing, and - for want of a more basic word - reproduction. These drives fanned out into fast-acting systems, alerting reptiles to compete pitilessly for food, to ward off any threat, to dominate their territory, seek a place of safety, and perpetuate their genes. Our reptile ancestors were, therefore, interested only in status, power, control, territory, sex, personal gain, and survival. *Homo sapiens* inherited these neurological systems, they are located in the hypothalamus at the base of the brain, and it is thanks to them that our species survived. The emotions they engender are strong, automatic, and “all about me.” Over the millennia, however, human beings also evolved a “new brain,” the neocortex, home of the reasoning powers that enable us to reflect on the world and on ourselves, and to stand back from these instinctive, primitive passions. But the Four Fs continue to inform all our activities...These instincts are overwhelming and automatic; they are meant to override

our more rational considerations...Much of the twentieth century was certainly red in tooth and claw, and already the Four Fs have been much in evidence in the twenty-first... And yet human beings continue to endorse ideologies that promote a principled, selfless empathy.

A thought-provoking response to those who view homosexuality as “unnatural” or against human nature has been made in the first comprehensive book on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims by Dr. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, a gay Muslim scholar who teaches Islamic Studies at Emory University:

Modern psychiatry increasingly holds that sexual orientation is an inherent part of an individual’s personality. Elements affecting sexual orientation may be genetic, influenced by hormonal balances in the womb, and shaped by early childhood experiences, the cumulative effects of which unfold during adolescence and early adulthood. Most psychiatrists in the West (and increasingly among professionals in Muslim communities) assert that one’s attitude toward one’s sexual orientation is largely cultural, but that orientation itself is not cultural. The behavior deriving from one’s sexual orientation is subject to rational control and clinical modification, but the underlying sexual orientation is not. In pre-modern times, philosophers also observed that sexual orientation was largely determined outside the choice of the individual...As professionals in Muslim communities slowly adopt clinical approaches based on research and modern medicine, they advocate a non-judgmental approach. At the same time neo-traditionalist Muslims caricature homosexuality as a crime, a disease, or an addiction, and they have a wide audience. (*Homosexuality in Islam*, Oneworld Publications, London, 2013)

Despite the new data that has emerged and is growing regarding the nature and causes of sexual orientation, in my opinion, a number of Jews, Christians and Muslims who are open to re-examination of the traditional view that homosexuality is “unnatural,” would agree with the statement that “the specific origins of sexual identity and its etiology are still imperfectly understood.” (Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinat. comprising official representatives of several institutions affiliated with Reform Judaism, 1990).

While the debate continues between those who condemn homosexuality on the basis of reasons stated above, and those who oppose them, same gender relationships have received social and legal recognition in many countries including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. As pointed out by William Stacy Johnson, “The new politics of gay recognition has come dramatically into conflict with than older politics of social control. In response to gay and lesbian demands for inclusion in the institution of marriage, others have insisted that changing the definition of who has access to marriage will have bad consequences for society as a whole. Although Europe and Canada have managed the political transition from control to recognition with relatively less social upheaval, in the United States the move toward recognizing same-gender relationships has led to a formidable backlash.” (*A Time to Embrace Same Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

We are living in strange times reminiscent of Dickens’ memorable words at the start of *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...

While the “formidable backlash” against gay marriages mentioned above was going on, the U. S. Supreme Court was making landmark decisions which would lead to what *Time* magazine (February 2, 2015) has referred to as “one of the most rapid and dramatic political shifts in U.S. history.” It further points out:

Now there is little doubt that by summer, same- sex marriage rights will be the law of the land. The die was cast in 1996, when the Supreme Court struck down Colorado’s law, ruling for the first time that gay people cannot be discriminated against through the law, no matter what the majority of voters might think. In 2003, the court went further, ruling

that moral teachings are not sufficient reason to deny homosexuals the freedom to form intimate relationships. These two concepts led directly to the 2013 opinion in which the Justices - the same nine who will decide this year's case - struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)...The court ruled that the Constitution bars the federal government from treating opposite sex marriages differently from same-sex marriages in states which legalize both. Now the court will apply the same reasoning to state laws. Does the Constitution allow states to discriminate when Congress cannot? Can the 14 states that still ban same-sex unions refuse to recognize those performed in other states?... Justice Anthony Kennedy, the dominant voice in the court's gay rights cases for two decades, left no doubt about his thinking in his 2013 majority opinion: "No legitimate purpose" exists to justify a law "to disparage and to injure" same-sex couples. DOMA "instructs all federal officials, and indeed all persons with whom same-sex couples interact, including their own children, that their marriage is less worthy than the marriage of others"...The implications of such strong language are clear.. Polls show that the majority of Americans are willing, even eager, to see the court take the final step.

The making of laws which protect vulnerable and marginalized persons from discrimination and harm is a highly significant event. Having seen the promulgation of laws which eroded the foundations of the human rights of Muslim women in Pakistan and other Islamic countries, and the devastating impact of these laws on so many precious lives, I am so thankful knowing that my gay sisters and brothers in the U.S. will soon have the same legal rights as other Americans. But is the securing of legal rights - important as they are - all that these brothers and sisters want, or deserve, to have?

I am particularly concerned about my gay brothers and sisters who are Muslim especially if they are living in Islamic countries where homosexuality is condemned not only for reasons mentioned in the above account but also because it is seen as part of the evil of "Westernization" that has been imposed on them by erstwhile political colonizers or through the influx of mass Western culture in the modern era of cultural colonialism. There is no prospect of any gay rights movement arising in the Islamic world where the human rights of the majority of women are still unrecognized though the empowerment of women is one of the highest priorities of donor agencies in all Muslim countries. What can be done to bring about a change in Muslim societies

and communities toward those who are homosexual or transgender?

In response to the questions posed above I want to reiterate my belief that in order to open the hearts, minds and spirits of those who cherish the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is necessary to focus on God, “*Rahmaan*” and “*Raheem*”. I have cited many references to God’s infinite, unbounded Mercy and Compassion in texts that are very dear to believing Muslims, Jews and Christians. I have also referred to two Qur’anic verses which declare that God has willed on Himself the law of grace and mercy. Such a law has, however, not been willed on human beings to whom the Gracious Creator has granted the gift of freedom of will. God’s Mercy to human beings is shown through the moral guidance that is given to them. I quote below some Qur’anic texts that have profound ethical implications in the context of our dialogue.

In Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*: 13, the Qur’an tells us that diversity has been created by God for a reason. It states:

Behold! We have created you all out a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold God is all-knowing, all-aware.

With reference to the mention of the creation of all human beings from a male and a female, Muhammad Asad points out that several major Qur’anic exegetes have understood this as implying that the equality of biological origin reflects the equality of human dignity common to all. Explaining the phrase “know each other,” Asad says that this means that all belong to one human family, without any inherent superiority of one over another. He connects this idea “with the exhortation, in the two preceding verses, to respect and safeguard each other’s dignity. In other words, men’s evolution into ‘nations and tribes’ is meant to foster rather than to diminish their mutual desire to understand and appreciate the essential human oneness underlying their outward differentiations, and, correspondingly, all racial, national or tribal prejudice is condemned - implicitly in the Qur’an, and most explicitly, by the Prophet who said, ‘All people are the children of Adam, and Adam was created out of dust.’”

It is worth quoting the two preceding verses mentioned above since they show that God prohibits believers from engaging in immoral activities such as deriding, defaming, mocking, and insulting others through offensive name-calling, or invading the privacy of others, or speaking ill of them in their absence:

O you who have attained to faith! No men shall deride (other) men: it may well be that those (whom they deride) are better than themselves; and no women (shall deride other) women: it may be that those (whom they deride) are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame one another, nor insult one another by (opprobrious) epithets: evil is all

imputation of iniquity after (one has attained to) faith; and they who (become guilty thereof and) do not repent - it is they, they who are evildoers.

O you who have attained to faith! Avoid most guesswork (about one another) - for, behold, some of (such) guesswork is (in itself) a sin; and do not spy upon one another, and neither allow yourselves to speak ill of one another behind your backs.

In the above verses as also in Surah 4: *An-Nisaa'*: 148-149, and Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 16-19, the Qur'an decrees that all human beings must be protected from slander, ridicule and backbiting. Muslims who do not honor this fundamental human right which belongs as much to our gay brothers and sisters as to anyone else, are in violation of what God, "*Rahmaan*" and "*Raheem*" has mandated.

The Qur'anic statement that creation of diversity is a part of God's design requires deep reflection. Stating that "there is a moral purpose behind the single God's creation of different and seemingly contradictory human types," Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle observes: "Our human diversity is often cause for exclusion and violence, but it is actually God's way of challenging us to rise up to the demands of justice beyond the limitations of our individual egoism and communal chauvinism."

It is important to refer to the Qur'an's attitude toward religious diversity, particularly among adherents of monotheistic traditions, in this interfaith dialogue. In his book *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, the noted historian Arnold Toynbee has pointed out that all three religions which sprang from a common historical root - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - not only have a tendency towards exclusivism and intolerance, but also to ascribe to themselves an ultimate validity. This means that historically Jews, Christians and Muslims have each tended to assume that they had a highly privileged, if not exclusive, relationship with God. This assumption has often led to triumphalism and the trivialization of the "Other." It is categorically rejected by the Qur'an in a verse that is repeated twice (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62 and Surah 5: *Al-Maa'idah*: 69) and which has, in my opinion, no precedent in any religion:

Verily, those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians - all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.

The core message contained in the above text is that what matters to God is not the “label” - whether one calls oneself the adherent of the Islamic, Jewish, Christian or any other God-centered religion. ANYONE who believes in God, in accountability for one’s actions in this world on the Day of Judgment, and performs good deeds, will be rewarded by God and protected from fear and grief.

What is stated with regards to how God will judge people of diverse religious traditions, is stated in greater detail with regards to how God will judge individual human beings in Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 35) - a verse that refers explicitly to both men and women in the context of their relationship to God:

Verily, for all men and women who have submitted themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all devout men and devout women, and all truthful men and truthful women, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves (before God), and all men and women who give charity, and all men and women who fast (and have self-restraint), and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, for all men and women who remember and remember God unceasingly; for them (all) has God readied forgiveness and a mighty reward.

Just as God does not judge different religious groups on the basis of the names which they attach to themselves, God does not judge individual human beings on the basis of their sexual identity, or social, political or any other affiliations. Regardless of how Muslims have interpreted the specific texts in which they ground their condemnation of homosexuality, it is the essence of what God is - Most Merciful, Most Compassionate, Most Gracious, Most Just - that must lie at the core of their faith and ethical framework. Here I would like to refer to the two fundamental rules of Qur’anic interpretation stated by Muhammad Asad in the Foreword to *The Message of*

the Qur'an which is regarded by many contemporary Muslim scholars as the best English translation and explanation of the Qur'an:

Firstly, the Qur'an must not be viewed as a compilation of individual injunctions and exhortations but as one integrated whole: that is, as an exposition of an ethical doctrine in which every verse and sentence has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences, all of them clarifying and amplifying one another. Consequently, its real meaning can be grasped only if we correlate every one of the statements with what has been stated elsewhere in its pages, and try to explain its ideas by means of frequent cross-references, always subordinating the particular to the general and the incidental to the intrinsic...Secondly, no part of the Qur'an should be viewed from a purely historical point of view: that is to say, all its references to *historical* circumstances and events - both at the time of the Prophet and in earlier times - must be regarded as the illustrations of the *human condition* and not as ends in themselves. Hence, the considerations of the historical occasion on which a particular verse was revealed...must never be allowed to obscure the underlying purport of that verse and its inner relevance to the ethical teaching which the Qur'an, taken as a whole, propounds.

It is my earnest hope that the truth and wisdom of Asad's words cited above will reach not only Muslims who love the Qur'an, but also Jews and Christians who love their own scriptures. All of us are guilty, in some measure, of focusing on particular passages in our sacred texts rather than on seeking to understand their relationship to the larger context or the meaning of the text in its entirety. Karen Armstrong observes: "In fact, everybody reads the Bible selectively. If people followed every single ruling to the letter, the world would be full of Christians who love their enemies and refuse to judge other people, which is plainly not the case. Christians would also be obliged to eat Kosher meat (*Acts* 15: 20) and stone their disobedient sons to death (*Deuteronomy* 21: 18-21)...the Bible has to be read with care ..(It) is not a holy encyclopedia giving clear and unequivocal information, nor is it a legal code that can be applied indiscriminately to our very different society. Lifting isolated texts out of their literary and cultural contexts can only distort its message. Instead, we should look at the underlying principles of biblical religion, and apply these creatively to our own situation."

I would like to remind Muslims that a large part of the Qur'an's concern is to free human beings from the chains that bind them: traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic), tribalism, racism, classism or caste system, sexism, and slavery. Recognizing the human tendency toward dictatorship and despotism, the Qur'an states in categorical terms in Surah 3: *Al-'Imraan* : 79:

It is not conceivable that a human being unto whom God had granted revelation, and sound judgment, and prophethood, should thereafter have said unto people. "Worship me besides God" but rather (did he exhort them), "Become men of God by spreading the knowledge of the divine writ, and by your own deep study (thereof)."

The Qur'anic statement made with undiluted emphasis that God, "*Rahmaan*" and "*Raheem*", did not give the Prophet of Islam the right to command that his followers follow him rather than God, has profound implications for Muslims. Coupled with the fact that Islam has no Church that can institutionalize the edicts of its leaders, or ex-communicate those who do not obey its traditions and regulations, this means that no one other than God has the right to limit human freedom, as stated in Surah 42: *Ash-Shura'* : 21.

The cardinal principle that underlies Islam is belief in Tawheed which is enshrined in the words so greatly loved by Muslim mystics: "*laa ilaaha il-Allah*" (*There is no god but God*). Of great importance in this statement is the contrast between "*laa*" which represents negation of everything that is not God, and "*illa*" which affirms the Oneness and Allness of God. As pointed out by A. M. Schimmel, this contrast has been from early times a subject of interest to many "speculative minds who discovered not only a strictly dogmatic meaning, but also a deeper mystical truth in the confrontation of the '*laa*' and the '*illa*'." (*Gabriel's Wing*, Leiden, 1963). It was held by many Muslim mystics that it was not possible to find God until one had renounced everything that was not-God. A similar idea was expressed by Nathan Soderblom who was the Church of Sweden Archbishop of Uppsala between 1914 and 1931, and the recipient of the 1930 Nobel Peace Prize: "No is also needed. Without No there will be no proper Yes. For then all that denies and destroys, degrades and delays what is right and good would be allowed to remain unattacked and unabolished. That is why a No is necessary in the moral warfare of the individual, in the evolution of religion and in the history of the race." (Quoted in *Gabriel's Wing*)

In the context of “*Tawheed*”, the Qur’an makes many references to Prophet Abraham’s passionate, dedicated quest for God. Referring to his special virtue in this regard, the Qur’an states in Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 120-122: “He was devout to God, turning away from all that is false, and was never of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God.” Prophet Abraham’s demolition of the idols worshipped by his people sets a model for all who revere this great Prophet who is equally important for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In his historic Lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal has referred to “*Tawheed*” as “the foundation of world unity,” and stated: “From the unity of the all-embracing ‘*Ego*’ (*God*) who creates and sustains all egos follows the essential unity of all mankind.” In his view, “The essence of ‘*Tawheed*’ as a working idea is equality, solidarity and freedom.” Pointing out that Islam does not recognize the “tyrant overlordship” of either “the sceptered monarch” or “the surpliced priest,” Iqbal cites the example of the Prophet of Islam who translated the principles deriving from God’s Unity and Sovereignty into terms of actual living:

He shattered every ancient privilege,
And built new walls to fortify mankind,
He breathed fresh life in Adam’s weary bones,
Redeemed the slave from bondage, set him free.

(From *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, translated by A. J. Arberry, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, London, 1953)

Iqbal who is the foremost reformist thinker of the modern period, and is regarded as “the spiritual founder” of Pakistan, the only country in the world that was created in the name of Islam, was deeply aware of, and profoundly saddened by, the fact that “the pure brow of the principle of “*Tawheed*” has received more or less an impress of heathenism, and the universal and impersonal character of the ethical ideals of Islam has been lost through a process of localization.” The fact that in his own career as a political thinker Iqbal rejected this “process of localization” shows that for him the ideas implicit in “*Tawheed*” were a living force - a practical not just a theoretical necessity.

Explaining Iqbal’s unshakable loyalty to “*Tawheed*”, Halide Edib, Turkish writer, scholar, public

figure dedicated to women's emancipation, observed insightfully in her book, *Inside India* (1937):

To whatever political creed the Muslim may belong, his ultimate loyalty must be to the One God who cannot be symbolized by material objects or by ideas. This point was best expressed by the Muslim members of the "Front Populaire", in the French colonies. They lifted their fists like the rest of their comrades, giving the sign of their political creed, but added to it the lifting of their index finger to the sky. The last is the sign common to all Muslims: "There is no God but one God ..." is always said with that gesture meaning God to be above and beyond all terrestrial ideas and symbols.

Through his powerful message articulated in poetry and prose in Farsi, Urdu and English, Iqbal had motivated millions of Indian Muslims to struggle to actualize the ideal of "*Tawheed*" in practical terms. But his words and vision have been deliberately excluded from public discourse in Pakistan which owes its existence to Iqbal. This was done by the country's self-serving power-wielders who wanted to keep the people subservient, so that they would not challenge them or claim their own rights.

The moral, intellectual, social, cultural, economic and political degeneration that characterizes today's Pakistan is also evident, in varying degrees, in the Muslim world in general. The challenge posed to contemporary Muslims by Iqbal whose philosophy is rooted in the ethical vision of the Qur'an, is to return to "*laa ilaaha il-Allah*". What this means is that they must reject all that is in opposition to God even if it is a belief, an idea, an attitude, a custom, a practice, or anything else that has been hallowed by religious or cultural traditions. They must not deify symbols of authority or false gods that claim total allegiance. Those who worship what is not God are sternly rebuked in Surah 12: *Yusuf*: 40:

All that you worship instead of God is nothing but (empty) names which you have invented - you and your forefathers - (and) for which God has bestowed no warrant from on high.

This verse contains a critically important statement: "Judgment (as to what is right or what is wrong) rests with God alone."

We are living in a world in which hatred and fear of Islam is assuming near-cosmic proportions amongst many non-Muslims, and in which the majority of Muslims are acutely troubled by the increasing violence in their own societies. As a Muslim I feel very strongly that bearing witness to “*laa ilaaha il-Allah*” in word and deed, and inculcating in ourselves the essential attributes of God Who is “*Rahmaan*” and “*Raheem*” is the most important religious challenge that we face today. I believe that it is possible to reform Muslim societies and communities if we internalize and fulfill the constantly-reiterated Qur’anic commandment that we must be compassionate to those who are vulnerable to physical, emotional, psychological hardship, who are subjected to social, economic and political injustice, who suffer persecution commonly inflicted on those who are marginalized and unable to exercise the fundamental rights that God has granted to all human beings.

The Qur’an gives us a serious warning in Surah 29: *Al-‘Ankabut*: 1-3:

Do men think that on their (mere) saying, “We have attained to faith”, they will be left to themselves, and will not be put to a test? Yea, indeed, We did test those who lived before them; and so, (too, shall be tested the people now living; and) most certainly will God mark out those who prove themselves true, and most certainly will He mark out those who are lying.

As a Muslim I believe that we are called upon today to prove our faithfulness to God by committing ourselves to the cause and service of those individuals and groups in our communities who are facing the greatest jeopardy and difficulties. These certainly include our gay sisters and brothers. Impelled and compelled by the Quran’s ethical injunctions many of which I have cited in this letter, we must stand up for their dignity and safety. We must make the effort to connect with their humanity, to listen to their story, to share their suffering and joy. As a Muslim I believe that love is not a word, it is a deed. We must demonstrate through our actions that our hearts are open to our gay brothers and sisters and that we stand side by side with them in the loving presence of God, “*Rahmaan*” and “*Raheem*”.

Jews and Christians who also believe that God is Most Merciful and Most Compassionate, have an ethical mandate similar to that of Muslims. With reference to the Jewish tradition, Karen

Armstrong observes: “Throughout the Pentateuch, the priestly writers insist on God’s compassionate care for the creatures: all are pronounced good, exactly as he made them. Even those animals declared ‘unclean’ in the cult must be left in peace and their integrity respected.”

Love is the central focus of the primary commandments given by Jesus, as stated in *Mark* 12-30-31: “ This is the first: Listen, O Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” In *Matthew* 5: 44, Jesus commanded his followers to love even their enemies because God is merciful to good and bad people alike. As pointed out by Karen Armstrong, “In the New Testament, Jesus goes out of his way to consort with those whose sexual lives were condemned by the self-righteous establishment. According to Jesus, nobody has the right to cast the first stone in these matters. For centuries Christians failed to live up to this inclusive mandate and found it hard to accept their sexuality. Eventually, however, they learned to overcome their prejudice in favor of celibacy, and realized that heterosexual marriage could bring them to God...The current attempt to recognize homosexual partnerships is ... the latest development in the long struggle to bring sexuality in the ambit of the sacred.”

The strong emphasis on God’s Mercy and Compassion that is present in the Qur’an, the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible makes it self-evident that all human beings irrespective of sexual identity are recipients of God’s Unbounded Grace. Jews, Christians and Muslims must recognize what this means in terms of their interaction with their brothers and sister who are gay, lesbian or transgender. For me as a Muslim, the meaning is very clear. I must be merciful and compassionate toward all, especially toward those who are suffering. But as a Muslim I am also called upon to live up to principle embodied in “*laa ilaaha il-Allah*” and must say “No” to what is not in conformity with God’s Mercy, Compassion and Justice.

At an existential level I believe that what is truly important in our world and in our life are intimate human relationships and not sexuality whether heterosexual, homosexual or transgender. If a relationship of two human beings whatever their gender, is based on mutual love, compassion, respect, trust, protection, and fidelity, it is to be celebrated for it is certainly one of God’s greatest blessings to be cherished forever. On the other hand, if a relationship of

two persons of any gender, is characterized by selfishness, abuse, exploitation, cruelty, oppression, and disloyalty, it is not something to celebrate. In fact, if one of the partners in the relationship is in danger of being harmed by the other - as is, unfortunately, a very common occurrence, intervention becomes a moral duty.

I would like to end my letter to you - my sisters and brothers who are Muslim, Christian and Jewish - with the same words with which I began it: “*Bismil-laah ir Rahmaan ir Raheem*” (*In the Name of God, the Most Merciful and Gracious, the Most Compassionate and the Dispenser of Grace*) and the earnest request that we should all, individually and collectively, include it in our daily prayer and meditation.

To my gay sisters and brothers I send my blessings and the immortal words of Rumi who invites us all to a higher place beyond the reach of common humanity:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,

There is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,

The world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase each other

Doesn't make any sense.

(From *Essential Rumi* by Coleman Barks)

“*Was-salaam*” (*Peace be unto you*)

Riffat Hassan

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| <p>“In the Name of God: A Letter to Muslims, Jews and Christians,” presented at the Interfaith Dialogue on Human Sexuality (February 3-5, 2015) and at the Uppsala Theology Festival (February 6-8, 2015), sponsored by the Church of Sweden at Uppsala, Sweden, posted in English and Swedish on the Uppsala Theology Festival Website: http://m.svenskakyrkan.se/?di=1226954</p> |
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