

Human Liberation is Supported by the Holy Qur'an

Riffat Hassan

Liberating ideas lie at the heart of most enduring faiths, and Islam shares in these. Two themes particularly strike me as being of the highest importance. The first is the fundamental equality of humans before God. The other is religion's revolutionary aim of human liberation. From religion should come freedom to seek understanding of the will of God and life's purpose, and freedom to honor God's creation through self-development and striving toward God's ends...

While Muslim women continuously hear the refrain that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition, they continue to be subjected to grossly unequal treatment... The dominant, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have fostered the myth of women's inferiority in several ways. They have used sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (including disputed sayings) to undermine the intent and teachings of the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as the Word of God. They have taken Qur'anic verses out of context and read them literally, ignoring the fact that the Qur'an often uses symbolic language to portray deep truths. And they have failed to account for the overriding ethical values of the Qur'an, which stresses that human beings—women as well as men—have been designated to be God's "khalifah" (vicegerent) on earth and to establish a social order characterized by justice and compassion...

It is clear to me that, according to the perspective of the Qur'an, women and men are equal, and that women are entitled to an equal opportunity along with men for the actualization of their human potentialities. In fact, because of its protective attitude toward all downtrodden and oppressed classes, the Qur'an is particularly concerned about safeguarding the rights of women, and much Qur'anic legislation is designed to ensure that women are treated with justice in the home and in society.

The Qur'an holds before us a sublime vision of our human potential, our destiny, and our relationship with God. Its vision of human destiny is apparent in the exalted proclamation: "Towards God is thy limit" (Surah 53: An-Najm: 42). With this attitude, the Qur'an seeks to liberate all persons so that we may realize our potential fully. If all Muslims were to pursue the values of the Qur'an, they would create a Paradise of justice and peace on earth.

The means and ends of human liberation are foundational themes of the Qur'an: justice and the duty to strive for it, compassion for all things, the need to strive continuously for the cause of God ("jihad fi sabil Allah"). The most important form of "jihad" for contemporary Muslims is "ijtihad," or the exercise of rational judgment to understand the essential message of the Qur'an and to apply it to particular circumstances. Central to this message is an ethic of responsibility for our lives, for nature, and for the elimination of all inequities and injustices from human society. According to the Qur'an, justice is a precondition for peace: without justice—between men and women, as between classes and between nations—there can be no peace in the world.

Indeed, a large part of the Qur'an's concern is to free human beings from the chains that bind them—above all, authoritarianism and the blind following of tradition. “Let there be no compulsion in religion,” says the Qur'an (Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 256). God tells the Prophet Muhammad, “We made thee not one to watch over [others'] doings, nor art thou set over them to dispose of their affairs” (Surah 6: Al-An'am: 107). The greatest guarantee of personal freedom lies in the Qur'anic decrees that no one but God can limit human freedom (Surah 42: Ash-Shura: 21) and that “Judgment is Allah's alone” (Surah 12: Yusuf: 40)...

Our right to freedom includes the freedom to tell the truth, as one sees it. Without this, other freedoms are a charade and a just society is impossible. According to the Qur'an, truth is one of God's most important attributes, and the Qur'an emphasizes that standing up for the truth is a right and a responsibility that no Muslim may disclaim, no matter how hard the truth may be to tell (Surah 4: An-Nisa': 135). Further, the Qur'an forbids others to harm those who testify to the truth (Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 282).

The right to freedom of thought and expression was exercised by Muslims in the early centuries of Islam and was pivotal in the creation of an Islamic civilization characterized by outstanding achievements in diverse fields of knowledge. The early Muslims celebrated cultural diversity and engaged in rigorous intellectual discussion...

Centered in God and self-critical, the original Muslims believed that although God had given them the Qur'an and the Prophet had exemplified its teachings, it was their responsibility to implement its message in the “Islamic” societies that they were creating. These Muslims read the Qur'an as an “open,” rather than a “closed,” text and strove continually to understand its deeper meaning. This intellectual striving (*ijtihad*) ... made the Muslims of the first three centuries dynamic and creative peoples who paved the way for the European Renaissance.

It is a profound tragedy and irony that today's Muslims, in large numbers, regard Islam in monolithic terms and regard the *Shari'a* [the code regulating all aspects of a Muslim's life] as fixed. In much of the contemporary Muslim world, we see the substitution of traditionalism for the exercise of *ijtihad*—even a denial of the right of *ijtihad*.

To me, being a Muslim means renewing the cry of the modernists, “Back to the Qur'an and forward with *ijtihad*.” ... The Qur'an strongly guarantees all fundamental human rights, without reserving them to men alone. These rights are so deeply rooted in our humanness that their denial or violation is tantamount to a negation or degradation of that which makes us human. These rights came into existence with us, so that we might actualize our human potential. These rights not only provide us with the opportunity to develop all of our inner resources, but they also hold before us a vision of what God would like us to be, what God deems to be worth striving for.

Excerpted from Riffat Hassan, “Members, One of Another: Gender Equality and Justice in Islam,” The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health & Ethics, <http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan.htm>, accessed March 1, 2006.

Bones and clothed the bones
 With flesh; then We developed
 Out of it another creature.
 So blessed be Allah,
 The Best to create!⁸

Elsewhere, the Qur'an describes Adam, appointed as *khalifah* or vicegerent (one who exercises delegated power) of the earth, and his mate as involved in a collective act of disobedience but also of free choice. After being deceitfully tempted by Satan to transgress the limits set by God, they apologetically admit, "Our Lord, we have wronged our own souls" (7: 23). There is no special blame placed on the woman, nor does she have any separate conversation with the serpent representing Satan. But Muslim folk tradition names Hawwa (Eve), presents her as an eternally flawed secondary creation from the crooked rib of Adam, created for rather than with him, blames her for the fall of humanity, and tends to regard all "daughters of Eve" with suspicion and even hatred. These misogynistic non-Qur'anic ideas have fully penetrated the *Hadith* literature. Both al-Bukhari and Muslim al-Hillaj report various versions of a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, on the authority of a companion called Abu Huraira. One version runs like this: "Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so benefit by her while crookedness remains in her."⁹

In contrast to the misogyny that has crept into popular Muslim beliefs, the Qur'an clearly safeguards women's rights to respect and security. If a woman is suspected of sexual relations outside marriage, the Qur'an provides that she cannot be considered guilty unless there are four witnesses to her immoral behavior (4: 15).

According to the Qur'an, all of humanity is created in the "best of molds" (95: 4), for the purpose of serving God. All humans are given the same call to righteousness and the same promise of heavenly reward:

The Believers, men
 And women, are protectors,
 One of another: they enjoin
 What is just, and forbid
 What is evil: they observe
 Regular prayers, pay
 Zakat [charity] and obey
 Allah and His Messenger.
 On them will Allah pour
 His mercy: for Allah
 Is exalted in power, Wise.
 Allah hath promised to Believers,
 Men and women, Gardens
 Under which rivers flow,
 To dwell therein,
 And beautiful mansions
 In Gardens of everlasting stay.
 But the greatest bliss
 Is the Good Pleasure of Allah: that is the supreme triumph.¹⁰

The Qur'an does make some provision for chastisement of disobedient wives by their husbands. The basic passage from the Holy Qur'an in this regard is:

Men are the protectors
And maintainers of women,
Because Allah has given
The one more [strength]
Than the other, and because
They support them
From their means.
Therefore the righteous women
Are devoutly obedient, and guard
In [the husband's] absence
What Allah would have them guard.
As to those women
On whose part ye fear
Disloyalty and ill-conduct,
Admonish them [first],
[Next] refuse to share their beds,
[And last] beat them [lightly];
But if they return to obedience,
Seek not against them
Means [of annoyance]:
For Allah is Most High,
Great.¹¹

In the past, the Holy Qur'an was interpreted primarily by men, but some female scholars have now begun to dig into its meanings from a woman's point of view. Carefully considering the interpretations of specific words, cultural contexts, and overall intentions of the revelations, Islamic Studies Professor Amina Wadud concludes that the scripture does not make any distinction between women and men in terms of spiritual potential, that woman is not considered just a child-bearer, that no explicit division of labor is specified, that marriage is not meant as a means of oppression of women, and that the social reforms started in the Holy Qur'an are meant to be extended in ever-evolving, changing circumstances. A sample of her exegesis is given here (see box, p. 248), with particular reference to Surah 4: 34, cited above, which has been used to excuse wife-beating.

<p>"Human Liberation is Supported by the Holy Qur'an," in <i>Women in Religion</i>, by Mary Pat Fisher, Pearson Longman, New Jersey, 2007, pp. 244-247.</p>
