

## Activist

Winifred Gallagher

With thousands of other Americans, I first encounter Riffat Hassan, a pioneering scholar of Islamic feminist theology, as a guest on television's *Nightline*. The brainy news program is examining a horrific crime against women wrought in religion's name. Each year thousands of Muslims are the victims of "honor killings," murdered by male relatives for behavior alleged to jeopardize their families' reputation. Such offenses range from adultery and elopement to being seen with a man or gossiped about.

This dismal statistic assumes human faces when *Nightline* shows clips from a BBC documentary called *Murder in Purdah*. A distraught mother explains that her young daughter was hacked to death with axes for talking to a male childhood friend while fetching water. A mutilated woman who managed to take her abusive husband to court weeps as she recounts that the judge declared she was insane. A sixteen-year-old Pakistani girl, who was accused of infidelity by her husband's family, doused with kerosene, and set

aflame, moans and tosses on her hospital bed; a voice-over says that she died the next day.

Right away Dr. Hassan's traditional Pakistani *salwar kameez* distinguishes her from the talking heads usually recruited to discuss the news. Then, too, her flashing eyes and the posh British accent of her upper-class background present a very different image of Muslim womanhood from the familiar anonymous figure shrouded in a *chador*. She may be a professor of religious studies, but she soon makes plain that, for her, neither scholarship nor religion is just an abstract pursuit; they are matters of life and death.

First, Dr. Hassan goes straight for the stereotype lodged in the Western viewer's mind. Any abuse of women is utterly unjustified by the Qur'an, she says: "In a society constructed on the true basis of Islam, men and women would be equal, as they are in the sight of God." The religion's real teachings about women have been perverted by those who believe that "male honor is priceless and irreplaceable and women are not."

It's impossible to determine exactly how many thousands of women are murdered each year in honor killings, because most of their deaths are never reported. When they are, the killers are rarely prosecuted and often become local heroes. In the BBC documentary a grinning man in a group of admiring villagers explains that women are weak-minded and immature. If they were allowed to venture beyond the bounds of *purdah*, he says, immorality and chaos would result. A proud father who killed his daughter because she eloped says with a smile, "There is no greater honor anywhere!"

What's striking about Dr. Hassan's brief remarks about honor killing isn't so much her assertion that Islam doesn't advocate the oppression of women but her declaration that it can actually stop such injustice. It's soon clear that this aristocratic scholar who fights for the uneducated poor is also an ardent feminist who's a devout Muslim. "Women need to be educated about their rights under Islam," she says. Already young women pursuing this inquiry are discovering "a different kind of Islam," which, she tartly adds, "the Western media don't see."

Even the grim documentary offers glimpses of Dr. Hassan's "different kind of Islam." In one arresting sequence sixteen women who've been sentenced to be hanged for killing abusive or murderous husbands go about their routines in jail. Such women often like prison, says the narrator, because it provides not only protection and the physical necessities but also education. In another shot a poor woman holds up her maimed hands and explains that she doesn't blame God for her burns and missing fingers. "It's the men who have done this," she says.

Intrigued, I do some research on Dr. Hassan's kind of Islam and find that it's a profound challenge to the misogynistic sort promulgated by "Islamization." This rapidly spreading political movement seeks to establish governments that rule by "Islamic law," which in reality imposes not just religion but patriarchal culture. The paradoxically modern phenomenon's two legislative hallmarks are harsh criminal punishments, such as stoning and amputation, and rules that control women. For example, Islamizers distort the custom of *purdah*, or the separation of women from male society, until all public space essentially becomes a male preserve. Women can rarely venture beyond the home, and when they do they must be heavily veiled and segregated. Those who disobey can be beaten, mutilated, burned, or even murdered.

The "Islam" that deprives the average Muslim woman—who's a poor, illiterate villager in the developing world—of basic human rights is based on male theologians' traditional readings of certain sections of the Qur'an. As one of the first feminist Muslim theologians, Dr. Hassan has spent years meticulously analyzing the text, and she disputes these long-entrenched interpretations. Chapter 4, verse 34, for example, has long been regarded as the Qur'an's definitive verse about women. This passage describes men's relationship to women with the Arabic word *qawwamun*, which is usually translated as "rulers," "masters," or "custodians." Dr. Hassan's interpretation is "those who provide support or livelihood," or what we might call breadwinners for childbearing women.

It's hard to overstate the immensity of Dr. Hassan's goal of persuading the Muslim world to read the Qur'an in a new way. After

a hundred years of scholarly analysis of the Bible, most mainstream Jews and Christians no longer subscribe to scriptural inerrancy, or the view that its every word is literally true; moreover, they actively strive to make the ancient text relevant to their post-modern lives. In contrast, most Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the literal words of God as spoken to the prophet Mohammad. Its canonical text has not changed since it was established in 651–652 C.E., and it has not been subjected to modern Islamic scholarship. A “historical Qur'an” may be inevitable, but it's still a highly controversial idea within the vast, volatile Islamic world. In much of it, Dr. Hassan's seemingly unexceptionable assertions that the same word can have different interpretations, and that a proper understanding of the Qur'an requires “looking at the whole picture, rather than lifting out one line of Arabic text,” are dangerous heresy.

Despite the risks, women's plight in her native Pakistan has turned this American scholar, who has been a professor in the University of Louisville's religious studies program for twenty-five years and formerly taught at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, into an activist. Her major tool is the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan, which she founded to marshal international political pressure and financial support on behalf of endangered women throughout the Muslim world. There are signs of progress. In 2000, Dr. Hassan met privately, in Lahore, with General Pervez Musharraf, the president of Pakistan, who has proclaimed official opposition to honor killings and promised to improve medical care for female burn victims. At the same time, however, the crisis is spreading. *Honor killing* has a medieval ring, but, according to Amnesty International, the number of such crimes in Muslim countries—including Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and Morocco—is “on the rise as the perception of what constitutes honor . . . widens.”

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Riffat Hassan invites me to attend a program called “The Many Voices of Women in Islam,” convened by Auburn Seminary at Manhattan's Central Synagogue. As soon as she begins to speak, I

pity those who share the stage. This diva grips the audience by its collective lapels with her small, expressive hands and, in an urgent voice, bombards us with facts and theories, anecdotes and arguments that illustrate the disastrous effects of conflating religion and patriarchal politics.

Offering an example, Riffat says that Islamic courts require four witnesses to a crime, but in Pakistan this law has been reinterpreted to mean four *male* witnesses. Thus, even a woman who has been assaulted can't testify on her own behalf. As her listeners trade startled looks, she describes a nearly blind servant who was raped and impregnated by her master. The victim's own testimony counted for nothing, and the court went so far as to blame her for the crime. Even Pakistan's beleaguered women were so outraged by the sentence of a hundred lashes and ten years in prison—regarded by the judges as a merciful alternative to death by stoning—that they dared to protest. The servant was freed, but the law remains.

Just warming up, Riffat asserts that oppressing women in the name of Islam is particularly heinous because the Qur'an and the Prophet accorded women not just the basic human rights but special ones meant to protect them from abuses tolerated in pre-Islamic Arab society, such as female infanticide. "The way I interpret the Qur'an," says Riffat, "there's no discrimination at all against women. If anything, they're favored! How can Islam, which teaches that man and woman are equal in the eyes of God without distinction of color, creed, and language, be biased? The answer is in the Qur'an, if one reads with open, unprejudiced eyes, but some clerics just want us to memorize it without understanding the meaning! We need a radical revision of how the Qur'an is interpreted!"

Next, Riffat really shakes up her liberal audience by challenging their moral complacency. Ultraconservative Muslim men are not the only group that doesn't understand and respect mainstream Muslim women, she says. Neither do secular human rights activists and feminists who "insist that Islam and human rights are incompatible." These good liberals fail to appreciate that the core

of the average Muslim woman's life is "a very deep faith in God and the goodness of God," says Riffat. "Whatever happens to such a woman, she's able to survive, because her faith keeps her going from day to day. What she doesn't know about is the empowering vision of the Qur'an—that God has given a woman the right to be educated, work, have justice, be her own person." The typical Muslim woman's "Islamic" understanding of her role is actually a cultural one, which asserts that women are secondary, derivative, and subordinate, says Riffat, so that even though religion keeps her going, it doesn't transform her life. "But if she can be made aware that she has religious rights—say, to be educated—then she has a weapon, a tool of liberation!"

Like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Riffat insists that religion can free people, not just control them. She finds a powerful precedent for her nonviolent revolution in Christian liberation theology, which has used the Gospels' theme of social justice to break up Latin America's feudal structure and create a middle class. "How do you reach the average Muslim woman?" she says. "Ask her if she believes in God. She does. Then ask her if she believes that God wants her to be abused and beaten. You can see the light go on in her eyes when she understands that she has power within herself and that her religion can help free her from society."

Riffat has seriously exceeded the time apportioned to each panelist. In response to the moderator's alarmed looks, she smiles, sighs, and ends on a life-or-death note. She points to the progress of the international effort to outlaw the practice of female genital mutilation, then urges her listeners to support the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan. Its worldwide membership, like those of many other human rights movements, posts news and conducts much of its business via the Internet. "Women are being killed each year by the thousands," says Riffat, nodding to the agitated moderator, "and so much remains to be done!"

After resounding applause, the audience releases a collective sigh and sits back in their chairs. The male editor of a prestigious

religious journal shakes his head wonderingly and says, "She could have been the whole show!"

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Riffat Hassan travels a lot. When she's not teaching, she takes her crusade for Muslim women's rights on the road, giving lectures, lobbying at national and international conferences, and making extended working visits to Pakistan. On a cold winter day in Manhattan, she arrives for an interview wearing a barn jacket over her *salwar kameez* and pulling a wheeled suitcase stuffed with information about violence against women. She has just come from the United Nations, which she hopes will make honor killing an international issue.

After seating herself on a couch and fielding a few phone calls, Riffat sighs deeply. "I'm so tired—really brain-dead," she says, "but that's fine, that's okay. On the way here, this cabdriver said to me, 'You know, the problem in this country is these white women. They have manipulated the Caucasian men. They're just so awful! They sleep around and have no morals. The courts favor them. The man has no chance. Muslim men are good, because they know how to keep their women in check.' It's that stereotype of Muslims as barbarous, backward, antimodern, antiwomen!"

If Americans could once afford to ignore seemingly foreign Islam, they can no longer, since it's now the country's fastest-growing religion. There are already more Muslims in the United States than Jews or Episcopalians. Nonetheless, says Riffat, a "legacy of misunderstanding still exists at every level." Her work makes her especially concerned about one common form of Islam bashing: sweeping generalizations about oppression of women based on the worst offenders. To her, honor killings are part of a global spectrum of violence against women that includes the battered-wife syndrome only recently acknowledged in the West. When their men are singled out as abusive, she says, "Muslims react defensively, which makes the real problems more difficult to uncover and address."

After a glass of ice water, Riffat settles down to discuss her evo-

lution as a feminist Muslim theologian. She says that this unusual career was jump-started by several unavoidable realizations. "I became angry for two reasons," she tells me. "One was the gap between what the Qur'an says about women and what actually happens to them in Muslim society. The other was what had happened to me."

Nothing would have been easier than for the brilliant daughter of a wealthy Lahore family of distinguished Muslim lineage to distance herself from the hard life of most of her countrywomen. A stormy childhood, however, made Riffat sympathetic to underdogs. Her proper, traditional father "thought girls should be married by sixteen to someone picked out by their relatives," she says. "He was a very good man trying to do the best thing, but I saw him then as an authoritarian who wanted to sacrifice me at the altar of convention." Her fiery, difficult mother was a radical nonconformist who refused to be submissive to men and insisted on her four daughters' education. Relations between this odd couple were such that "the one roof under which we all lived could not be called a home," Riffat says, "if one defines this term as a place of love, warmth, and security."

Seeking refuge, Riffat spent much of her childhood alone with her books and "the Creator and Preserver, who at all times seemed very close," she says. "I often asked God to reveal to me the purpose of my life and help me to fulfill it." Watching her older sisters married off at sixteen, however, eventually galvanized the dreamy, reclusive girl into rebellion. "I realized that the drama would be repeated again, and that I had to fight," says Riffat. "Whatever my father said, I said no, because once I said yes, that would be it."

With the support of her mother, who nicknamed Riffat the "leader of the opposition," she escaped an early arranged marriage, stayed in her British coeducational school, and, at sixteen, ranked first among her province's 24,000 students. At seventeen she had published two volumes of poems and stories. A relative helped her gain admittance to the University of Durham. On the day she departed for England, her father spoke to her for the first time in five years, conferring an unexpected blessing on the daughter who



made him both ashamed and proud. Still a schoolgirl, Riffat was already a veteran of the struggle between devout Muslim women determined to be free and a patriarchal culture, buttressed by religious language, that was equally determined to constrain them.

The tumultuous 1970s meant social revolution in the West, political revolution in much of the Islamic world, and personal transformation for Riffat. By the age of twenty-four, she had her Ph.D. in literature—her doctoral thesis was on the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal—and “there was nothing else to study,” she says. “I left England, went back to Pakistan, and got married to a man I chose.” Riffat had dreamed of a writer’s life in her homeland, surrounded by beloved siblings and friends. Rampant political corruption, however, soon motivated the young couple to seek their fortune in the United States.

Describing the mind-boggling transition from Pakistan to America, Riffat recalls that, when she and her husband first arrived, they lived with relatives who got her a job—as a cashier in a supermarket. “I had a Ph.D.,” she says. “I didn’t even last one day!” America was still deep in the throes of cultural upheaval, from civil rights to the sexual revolution, that began in the sixties. Riffat was particularly interested in feminism, which she defines as “believing that women have the same rights as men to develop their potential, which has nothing to do with anti-men or -children or -marriage!”

Just as Riffat was discovering such new political movements, Americans, stunned by the oil embargo and the Iranian revolution, were discovering the Muslim world. All of a sudden, she says, “everyone wanted to talk about Islam. And a Muslim woman who was also a feminist—that was a real rarity!” Before long the young academic was not only a professor of Islamic studies but an early participant in the new forum of “interfaith dialogue.” With characteristic candor Riffat remembers wondering, “If I had stayed in Pakistan, who would be interested in my opinion? Here, everyone wants to know what I think!”

Riffat’s real debut as a feminist Muslim theologian took place in the unlikely venue of the University of Oklahoma. When she was

hired as a professor of Islamic studies there, she automatically became the faculty adviser to the Muslim students' organization. Most members of the entirely male group came from ultraconservative Islamic oil nations, such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. "The students believed that my presence was *haram*—dangerous to their souls," she says. Nevertheless, the men had to accept her as their adviser and listen to her deliver an annual address. "They assumed that I was capable of speaking only about women and Islam," she says. "They wanted me to talk about being a good wife!" Spurred by her students' unquestioning acceptance of patriarchal interpretations of Islam, Riffat decided to make a systematic study of what the Qur'an actually says about women. "That's how it started with me!" she says.

Riffat's rapid intellectual and professional growth exacted a toll on her private life. Her traditionalist husband couldn't cope with his wife's higher status and earnings in their new culture; after five years and the birth of a beloved daughter, the couple divorced.

From the ashes of Riffat's personal life, however, rose a profound understanding of how culture can combine with religion to shape women's lives. "My experiences of being a Muslim female—with my father, husband, and so on—all began to fall into place," she says. "Before, I had just lived through things without analyzing them. Now, I began to see that what I experienced was not just something that some man did to me but something systematic that involved a whole society."

Most people who arrive at such conclusions, whether in a political movement or in a therapist's office, simply try to protect themselves and their dear ones from future injustice. Riffat took on a much larger challenge. "I come from a family and society in which there's tremendous discrimination in terms of status and

roles," she says. "But I had always been for the underdog. That's part of who I am. Sometimes God says, 'There are certain things that I intend for you.' So I just got into this thing."

If Riffat's unusual "thing" makes her stick out among Muslims as a feminist, it also makes her stick out among secular rights activists and feminists as a devout Muslim. "I don't have any problem with them, because they want to do some good," she says. "But they have a huge problem with what I'm doing. They're in denial about the life of faith of simple people. Religion isn't the 'opiate of the masses,' because an opiate drugs you. Millions of people who go to bed hungry and suffer hardship and oppression need to know that religion can empower them instead of just sustaining them. If they become aware of what rights they actually have through religion, they can start analyzing their lives. It's just a short step—and one that seems so central to me—but it's so hard to establish with secular groups, from the UN on down, because they're so hostile to religion."

Hostility to religion can spring from surprising sources, including major divinity schools. Riffat recalls a year spent at one such institution. "At first, the women scholars there saw me as a deviant from the Islamic tradition, so they supported me," she says. "But once they understood that I was very religious, they became extremely negative. Everything I believed in was challenged in such a brutal way, because they were so clever and mostly antireligious. I came out of this ordeal by fire knowing exactly who I am and what I want to do, and if they don't like it, fine. My experience is that these women are very small in number."

If Riffat faces some opposition to her brand of religious feminism from both the left and the right, she also enjoys much support. For twenty-five years she has belonged to a group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims who work for interreligious understanding and human rights. Her commitment began in the 1970s, when the American Jewish Committee invited her to speak about the relationship between Islam and Judaism, past, present, and future. "With such a subject," she says, "you're going to annoy someone! They had never had a Muslim speaker before, and I don't know how they found me, but that was the beginning."

Where sexism is concerned, Riffat sees more similarity than difference among the monotheistic cousins. “The Jewish, Christian, Arabic Bedouin, and Hellenic biases against women all fell into Islam’s basket, because it’s the youngest of the three faiths,” she says. “There are some distinctions, but the basic problems are very much alike. They’ve all treated women terribly—as misbegotten males.”

Making a powerful statement about postmodern religion, Riffat says that she regards her interreligious group as her “community of faith—the only one I’ve ever had. Some members have become lifelong friends who’ve supported me in a way my own birth community hasn’t.” During dark moments, she says, “I know I’m not alone in the wilderness, because there are people in the world who understand my calling.”

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Many of my contacts with Riffat take place through the modern globe-trotting activist’s most powerful weapon: the Internet. Her frequent e-mails alert INRFVVP members about abused women who need help, protests to be lodged with government officials, news about women’s rights in general and Muslim women’s in particular, and, not infrequently, a bit of personal news.

One classic e-mail of ten pages begins with Riffat’s assurance that she has weathered a recent health crisis—“by the grace of God, I feel stronger”—and ends with a report of a private interview with General Musharraf, who she feels is well-disposed toward the cause. In between, she covers a lot of ground.

Touching on ideology, Riffat laments that, just as ultraconservative Muslims have “hijacked the discourse on Islam,” “equally zealous” antireligious social activists have co-opted the discussion of human rights. Rather than importing their secular code, writes Riffat, Muslims should realize that “the strong affirmation of human rights found in the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) can be made the basis for building a just society in which the rights of every woman, child, and man are honored.”

Next Riffat reports on a recent visit to a clinic for poor mothers

and children outside Lahore. Even the center's twenty female staffers at first denied any personal knowledge of violence against women, she writes. After much reassurance, however, they all eventually admitted that they had been beaten by husbands or other relatives. One woman had seen a man strangle his sister because she stood in a doorway to peer at a shop across the street.

Riffat is nearly as upset by the women's reaction to the men's behavior as by the brutality itself. Many women said it was "normal" for men to beat their wives, who must have done something to "deserve" it. Nor did they feel sorry for these victims or wish to help them. Perhaps saddest of all, they felt that it was their daughters' "destiny" to be beaten, too. "The road to the uplifting and empowerment of these human beings who do not understand what it is to have human rights is a long and arduous one," Riffat writes. This realization, however, should only increase the "indomitable determination" that no girls or women should regard being beaten as their destiny.

One afternoon, when Riffat is passing through New York on her way to a large women's rights conference in Baltimore, she makes some time to talk about her experiences in Pakistan since emigrating to the United States. Scholars are often accused of dwelling in ivory towers, in a state of lofty ignorance about real life. Riffat's continuing work in her struggling homeland grounds both her politics and religion in hard reality. She credits the two years she spent in Pakistan while the country was in the throes of Islamization for helping her realize the transformative power of religious activism. "The nation's whole public discourse had suddenly become Islamic," she says. "To take part, you had to be able to talk about the religion knowledgeably."

Islamization appears to be all about religion, but it's mostly about the idea that "modernity doesn't offer a better life, but only more colonizing from the West," says Riffat. In response to this perceived threat, governments try to uphold and impose anti-Western cultural mores in the name of Islam. If Islamizers are suspicious of modernity, they see the West as downright demonic, particularly where women are concerned. "When a boy and girl

return home after studying in the United States,” she says, “the boy is ‘modernized,’ but the girl is ‘Westernized.’”

When women are murdered in the name of Islam, it’s easy to overlook subtler yet more pervasive consequences of religious sexism. One such problem is many Muslim women’s seeming tolerance of injustice. In 1995 in Beijing, at the fourth UN World Conference on Women, a large group of black-robed women, backed by conservative Muslim men, staged a protest against human rights activism on their behalf. “Those women in Beijing insisted that Islam is great for them, that they’re treated as queens, and that the UN and lesbian feminists should stay out of their business,” says Riffat. “But most Muslim women aren’t queens. They’re poor and uneducated.”

Riffat gained insight into such women’s apathy, even hostility, regarding their human rights from research on a community health problem conducted at Pakistan’s top medical university. The hospital, which treats its community’s poor regardless of their ability to pay, couldn’t understand why 97 percent of eligible women didn’t even seek care; the few who did came only when they were dying. A study revealed that the women simply didn’t believe their lives were worth the effort. This stark report stunned Riffat. “For the first time,” she says, “I became aware of how cultural stereotypes were killing women. They had internalized these ideas to the point that they put no value on their lives. That was a turning point!”

Much of the oppression wrought on women in Islam’s name is economic. Riffat offers an experience with the medical center’s school of nursing as an example. The Canadian administrators consulted her about possible religious reasons for their students’ improbably low self-esteem and puzzlingly high dropout rate. First, she explained that the Qur’an doesn’t say anything about nursing per se, but that caring for men violates Muslim norms of female modesty. From this perspective, she said, “no girls want to become nurses, because they must touch and clean male patients in intimate ways.”

Next, Riffat offered the administrators a feminist Qur’anic per-

spective on nursing: its departure from the code of modesty is more than justified by a higher duty approved by the Prophet himself. "If you read it in a comprehensive way, you see that because the Qur'an puts a lot of emphasis on learning, service, and healing, it has a very *positive* view of nursing," says Riffat. "Mohammad's wives used to go to the battlefield and pick up the wounded, give them medicines, and bandage them." Until such interpretations of the Qur'an circulate widely, however, Pakistan will be deprived of badly needed services and its women of badly needed careers.

The emphasis on a certain aspect of tradition, such as female modesty, over its larger, more philosophical vision is characteristic of religious fundamentalists, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. Among the other traits they share are a distrust of outsiders, the conviction that they own the Truth, and the defense of their narrow views with a rigid, literal interpretation of selected scripture. This practice of removing religious text from its context has had particularly disastrous effects on women. For example, Jesus was just plain nice to women and had important female disciples. Nonetheless, for nearly two thousand years the church used a few words from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians—"Let your women keep silence in the churches. . . . If they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home" (14:34-35)—to legitimize treating women as second-class Christians. Developments such as female ordination became possible only when the first generation of Christian feminist theologians emerged in the 1970s to reinterpret scripture and reassert its larger value of human equality.

Thanks to the Taliban, Westerners are becoming more aware of how Islam can be distorted for secular purposes. The Afghani extremists cite the Islamic principle of *pardah* in order to force women into the all-enveloping *burqa* and out of schools and jobs. Riffat's analysis of the Qur'an's Chapter 24, verses 31-32, which is usually invoked to defend *pardah*, reveals a prescription of modest behavior for both sexes. Women are merely asked to "draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty" when they're outside the home. Similarly, in Chapter 33, verse 59, the Qur'an

says that when “believing women” go out in public, they should “cast outer garments over their persons” so that they will be recognized as righteous and not bothered.

Muslim women around the world follow the rule of modest dress in culturally appropriate ways, from a headscarf to a caftan to a *salwar kameez*. The Qur’an never suggests that there’s anything objectionable about such customary clothing, says Riffat, yet in its name women are punished or even killed for allowing their faces or ankles to show. “Why the big fuss?” she asks. “Because when women appear in public, as Augustine of Hippo said, ‘They cause erections even in holy men.’ It’s always female, not male, sexuality that’s the problem.”

Riffat’s scholarly probe of the creation story as recounted by the monotheistic faiths reveals how insidiously cultural bias creeps into and subverts religion. In contrast to the Bible’s male-oriented “Adam’s rib” version, the Qur’an portrays the first woman in an egalitarian light. Humanity’s creation from a single source is described in both male and female language; subsequently, man and woman make a simultaneous appearance. Despite their own religion’s account, however, “most Muslims have picked up the idea that Eve is secondary to Adam,” says Riffat. “She was created not just from but for him, yet is somehow also responsible for their fall!”

Despite such obstacles, there are signs that women in the developing world are making progress in achieving equality. In this regard the UN International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo in 1994 was “a real step forward,” says Riffat. “Men have always been seen as both spirits and bodies. Women were just bodies and weren’t even the owners of them. At that conference, women said they owned their bodies.” Where Muslim women in particular are concerned, Riffat points to Iran. “The country has a hundred percent literacy rate because women there insisted that education was their Islamic right,” she says. “Human rights aren’t given. They must be taken.”



One afternoon, between speaking engagements at Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University, Riffat talks a little about her personal spiritual life. First, however, she remarks once more on the negativity toward religion that often prevails in such elite academic communities. To Riffat, this attitude reflects “what happens when you see religion only as institution, dogmas, language, gender issues—things that have nothing to do with the spiritual experience.” She shrugs. “The Sufis have the idea that you can’t get faith through reason or effort. It’s a gift. You have it or you don’t.”

As a professor, Riffat defines religion as a worldview whose six dimensions—ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, and experiential—are meant to help people understand the meaning of life. As a private individual, she sees religion as “a profound relationship with God. The way I read the biblical and Qur’anic texts, it’s very clear that God is involved with us. The Bible even uses metaphors like ‘suffers’ and ‘rejoices.’ I don’t think of God as a person with a capital P but as God appears in the Qur’an, described with metaphors, like light, life, consciousness. Religion is a relationship between this ultimacy and the believer.” This bond imposes a certain relationship among God’s creatures as well. “In my own life,” says Riffat, “I understand God in terms of love, compassion, justice. The Qur’an says everything in the world has been created for a just purpose, and all of the so-called prophetic religions are very justice-centered. As I see it, Islam’s mandate is to create a better world.”

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Many years after finishing her doctoral dissertation on Muham-

mad Iqbal, Riffat remains deeply stirred by the poet-philosopher's contention that the purpose of the whole universe was the creation of humanity. "Iqbal believed that God cares very much that each individual should realize his or her potential, which he called self-hood," she says. "We're made in God's image, and if God is your limit . . . That kind of vision."

That kind of vision has supported Riffat throughout what she calls "a very difficult life in many respects. Yet I've never lost that belief that there's a purpose to life and to my life. I believe very strongly in what Judaism calls the principle of election—that you are chosen for certain tasks." She stops to laugh over Jonah, one of her favorite Bible characters, "who runs in the direction opposite from what God asks!" Shaking her head, she says, "Things don't 'just happen.' I was born a Muslim, which was intended. It's not just simply something that's to be accepted rationally but something that permeates every aspect of my life. There's a certain paradox, because the Qur'an says that there's a direction in which God turns a person, and also says that one is free to choose. I think the freedom is that one can say no to God, or choose to submit."

*Islam* means "to submit to God." Riffat once described her faith as "Sufi-oriented, in the sense that it's very personal and not tied up with institutions and rituals, or even a community." Her remarks inspired me to learn a little more about Sufism, as Islamic mysticism is called.

*Sufi* derives from the Arabic word for wool, which refers to the plain garments that distinguished early Sufis from Muslims who had diverged from Islam's original simplicity. Muslims esteem science as the study of God's creation, and Sufis are the scientists of the soul, which they regard as a copy of the universe; indeed, Sufis believe that whoever masters his or her soul masters the whole world. In Islam, "There is no God but Allah," but in Sufism, "There is nothing but Allah."

Sufism is not a conventional religion. According to its "new school," popularized in the West by the writings of Idries Shah, one needn't be a Muslim, or even religious, to be a practitioner. A

Sufi I consulted said, “We believe we’re all born with the truth. God told Mohammad to ‘remind’ people of what they know. Those who get initiated always know.” To him, Sufism is just a deep “inquiry into the truth. It’s another way of seeing things, of crossing into another dimension. You lift a veil, you see something. You can’t explain it to others, but afterwards, what they say about the world doesn’t matter anymore.” Comparing the individual’s quest to the Qur’anic model for the attainment of mystical knowledge—the Prophet’s night journey through the seven heavens to God—he said, “It’s always inside, in you. You’re already there, but you can’t see it. A teacher just helps you know what you already know.”

When there’s nothing but Allah, reality is, according to one Sufi metaphor, simply the divine raiment. Even individual existence is a “sin,” because it implies separation from, or something that isn’t, God. The Sufi remedy is the spiritual practice of *fana*, or extinction; like *satori*, *samadhi*, and other experiences of mystical enlightenment, it eliminates self-consciousness and empties the person of everything but the divine.

Sufis rarely identify themselves as such and are circumspect about their mystical practices, which can include chanting, dancing, and study with a spiritual master. From its beginnings, in fact, Sufism has been surrounded by secrecy. One reason is that its openness to inquiry and its universalist perspective, which are endemic to mysticism, upset mainstream Muslims, who are strong doctrinal believers. Then, too, without study and preparation, most people simply can’t grasp assertions such as “There’s nothing but Allah.” As my Sufi adviser put it, “If you start with the truth, no one will believe you.”

After I tell Riffat about this impressive man, she describes a Sufi in Pakistan who’s “a wonderful person and very good friend. He’s the one living person I’ve met who . . . when you’re in his presence, you know he’s a very holy person. That radiance. If I’m in Pakistan for only two days, I go and see him because it gives me a lot of spiritual comfort.” Unlike Sufis, however, she’s uncomfortable with the idea of surrender to a spiritual master. “He’s right

and he's beautiful, but he's not God. My life and struggle are mine! He understands that."

Despite her respect for Sufism, Riffat prefers what she calls Qur'anic mysticism. She grabs a piece of paper, sketches a diagram that shows "the sought," "the way," "the seeker," and "the goal," and explains that different mystical traditions vary in how they fill in these blanks. For Islamic seekers, "the sought" is always God, and "the way" is always love, but there are two different goals. Sufis strive for a merger between the lover and the beloved. "When that happens," she says, "the identity of one of them is lost—in human relationships, usually the woman's! When you merge with God, the goal is *fana*—extinction. Your own personality is annihilated, extinguished. It's very much the same in Hinduism, with its image of the drop of water falling into the ocean."

Tapping her sketch, Riffat points out that in the Qur'anic mysticism she shares with Rumi and Iqbal, the goal is "to get to God's presence, as when Moses stood before the burning bush, but not to merge with God, because then one ceases to be. The dialogue isn't 'We love each other and become one, and I'm really the one.' Instead, it's 'We love each other because I am I and you are you, and for our love to be preserved, you need to be you and I need to be me.' After you've been in God's presence, you're transformed, and you must come back and change the world, like Moses."

Effortlessly segueing from the Qur'an to the Bible to Plato's *Republic*, Riffat says, "Let me refresh your mind about the allegory of the cave." She sketches the famous tale of prisoners whose only glimpse of the world comes from shadows cast on the cave's wall. One person breaks his chains and escapes. His first impulse is to be thankful that he's free and to run away. "But then he thinks about all the others, so he comes back and liberates them," says Riffat. "Having been freed by the presence of God, you must come back and help. This is very much how I understand Islam."

Without intending to, Riffat has neatly described her own genius. Because of individuals like her, more people now live in freedom than ever in history.

It has been another long day for Riffat, and she gives one of her

operatic sighs. “It must be so easy to be in a monastery or temple or whatever and not have to deal with the real world,” she says. “Maybe it’s a certain calling—”

The doorbell rings. A pretty Columbia sophomore, whose typical student garb is set off with a headscarf, has arrived to escort Riffat Hassan to her next mission of liberation.

“Activist : Riffat Hassan,” (Chapter 4) in *Spiritual Genius: 10 Masters and the Quest for Meaning*, by Winifred Gallagher, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2001, pp. 110 - 130.