

Dr. John Hubers resource list:

First - while I haven't read this book, I do like the author, who is one of the most prominent contemporary interpreters of Islam (and a fairly controversial figure, which gives him added prominence in my mind).

This would be a good introduction to Islam.

Second - John Esposito is a great academic interpreter of Islam for an American audience - long time professor of Islam at Georgetown University.

So, this also would be a good introduction to Islam:

[Introduction to Islam by Ramadan, Tariq \(amazon.com\)](#)

[Islam: The Straight Path by Esposito, John L. \(amazon.com\)](#)

Second, in the area of comparative religion, I would recommend this book:

[The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam \(Princeton Classics Book 34\) - Kindle edition by Peters, Francis Edward, Peters, F. E.. Religion & Spirituality Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.com.](#)

This is the study Qur'an I recommended:

[The Study Quran: A New Translation... by Nasr, Seyyed Hossein \(amazon.com\)](#)

And the paper I wrote on Muslim women who describe themselves as "Gender Jihadists":

**Through the Eyes of Women:**  
Re-reading the Qur'anic Creation Accounts

A paper presented to Dr. Mark Swanson  
for the partial requirements of  
“Major Themes of the Qur'an”  
(an independent study)

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In 1926 Reformed Church in America missionaries, Samuel and Amy Zwemer, co-authored a book on women in the Muslim world. Entitled simply, *Moslem Women*, its thematic contents can more or less be summarized with reference to a picture that appears as a whole page spread in the first part of the book. It is a picture of an Arab woman leaning on a water jug with a sad, wistful look on her face. At the bottom of the picture is the caption: “Hopeless.”

This was the Zwemer’s assessment of the situation of Muslim women no matter where they lived or what culture they represented. It was “hopeless.” And the source of their misery was Islam.

[T]he social life of Islam, its intellectual backwardness, and its moral corruptions are so much alike that we can only conclude that these conditions obtain not in spite of, but because of the religion of the people. These conditions are an unanswerable indictment of the inadequacy of the religion of Mohammed.<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary Muslim intellectuals whose works were consulted for this paper would question the monolithic nature and severity of this indictment, aimed as it is at “the inadequacy of the religion of Mohammed,” but not necessarily its underlying thesis. Like the Zwemers they believe that Islam has been interpreted, primarily by its male custodians, in ways that have been degrading to women, keeping them locked in a secondary status. Pakistani-born theologian, Riffat Hassan, goes so far as to say that,

the negative ideas and attitudes pertaining to women that prevail in Muslim societies in general, are rooted in theology. . . . [So] unless, or until, the theological foundations of the misogynistic and androcentric tendencies in the Islamic tradition are demolished, Muslim women will continue to be brutalized and discriminated against.<sup>2</sup>

Where Hassan and her companions in what one of their number has identified as a “gender jihad”<sup>3</sup> would part company with the Zwemers is in their source of hope for needed reform. The Zwemers, as traditional Protestant missionaries, believed that the only hope for Muslim women was conversion to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> For the gender jihadists, hope is found in a

conversion (return) to the pristine source of their faith – the Qur’an – which they believe to be a liberating document. The problem from their perspective is not the Qur’an, or even Islam itself.

The problem is the way the Qur’an and Islam have been (mis) interpreted.

Increasing numbers of Muslim around the world have begun to realize that the privileges accruing to men in Muslim societies are a function not of the Qur’an’s support for sexual inequality, but of the power that men enjoy in existing patriarchies, which Islam has had no hand in creating and which, in fact, it censures in different ways.<sup>5</sup>

### **Thesis Statement**

The attempt on the part of this group of female Muslim scholars to recover the egalitarian impulses of a Qur’anic-based faith is the general subject of this paper. More specifically it will focus on their attempts to recover a more egalitarian re- interpretation of the Qur’anic creation accounts. This, says Riffat Hassan, is their most crucial task.

It is imperative for the Muslim daughters of Hawwa’ to realize that the history of their subjugation and humiliation at the hands of sons of Adam began with the story of Hawwa’s creation, and that their future will be no different from their past unless they return to the point of origin.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Controversial Task**

The controversial nature of the gender jihadists’ task is underscored by the secretive nature of a six day conference of Muslim feminist activists from America, Europe, Africa and Asia that was held in an undisclosed location in October of 1990. The theme of this conference was, “For Ourselves: Women Reading the Qur’an.”<sup>7</sup> It was held under the auspices of the organization, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws* (WLUML),<sup>8</sup> that grew out of an *ad hoc* meeting of ten Muslim female activists held during a feminist gathering in the Netherlands in July of 1984.<sup>9</sup>

WLUML describes itself as “an international solidarity network that provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam.”<sup>10</sup> Most crucial here is the phrase: “said to derive from Islam,” which suggests that the laws and customs under which Muslim women are living are not necessarily definitive of Islam in its idealized form.

### **“Women Reading the Qur’an”**

A number of different topics were covered at the 1990 conference, one of which was the Qur’anic understanding of male-female relations as expressed in its creation accounts. Two presenters covered this topic, both of whom chose to remain anonymous. A brief examination of their presentations will highlight the assumptions and challenges facing this group of feminist intellectuals and theologians.

The underlying assumption of both presenters (an assumption which under-girded the entire conference) was that male dominance of the interpretive tradition of Islam (*tafsir*) has often led to a patriarchal, misogynist interpretation of texts which are more naturally and correctly read in an egalitarian fashion.<sup>11</sup> This is a recurring theme in the writings of the prominent feminists covered in this study, some of whom are deeply resentful of what this has meant for Muslim women over the years.

[T]he sources on which the Islamic tradition is mainly based, namely, the Qur’an, the Sunnah, the Hadith literature, and Fiqh, have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. It is hardly surprising that until now the majority of Muslim women have accepted the situation passively, almost unaware of the extent to which their human (also Islamic, in an ideal sense) rights have been violated by their male-dominated and male-centered societies, which have continued to assert, glibly and tirelessly, that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition.<sup>12</sup>

## The Presentations: Laying Out the Issues

The first presenter began her presentation by laying out what she describes as the three “foundational myths”<sup>13</sup> that had arisen out of a male-dominated interpretive tradition of the Qur’an. All three were based on interpretations of the Qur’an which would be challenged at this conference and in subsequent publications:

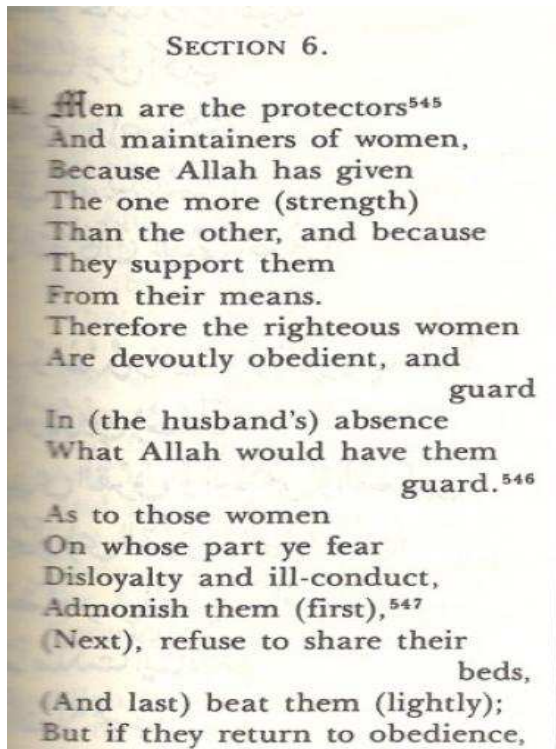
- God’s primary creation was Adam, making Eve a derivative, subordinate creation.
- Eve (*Hawwa*’ in Arabic; a name not mentioned in the Qur’an) seduced Adam to give in to the wiles of *Shaytan* (Satan) in the Garden, thus causing both to stumble. The female in this case is seen as a seductive, easily corruptible creature; a foil to the male’s attempt to live a godly life.
- Woman was created not only *from* man, but *for* man.<sup>14</sup>

Having established these as the primary problematic assumptions of the Islamic interpretive tradition, she then develops another major theme of the gender jihadists; that the thirty Qur’anic verses which touch on the creation of men and women for the most part use gender neutral, collective terminology -- terms such as *al-insan*, *al-bashar* and *an-nas*.<sup>15</sup> This is also true, she notes, of the Qur’anic use of the term, *adam*, which has its roots in the Hebrew word *adama* (“from the earth”). In twenty-one of twenty-five occurrences in the Qur’an it is used as a descriptive term for a common humanity.<sup>16</sup> This is noted to counter the tendency to interpret these texts as being descriptive of man apart from woman, making man the primary focal point of God’s creative process.

These are the basic interpretive parameters within which this group of Muslim feminists is operating. What follows gives us a glimpse into their exegetical methodology.

## Surah 4: 34

Of particular interest to the first presenter, as well as the next, is one of the most problematical texts in the Qur'an when it comes to male-female relations – Surah 4:34 -- which makes reference to God's creative purpose for men and women. This text, she asserts, is often “thrown in [the] face”<sup>17</sup> of feminists to “prove” that whatever else they may say about the Qur'anic message, male superiority is, without a doubt, the dominant theme of Qur'anic discourse. That this is not the case, she responds, is inherent in the text itself, which, read in consort with larger Qur'anic themes, establishes egalitarianism as the Qur'an's predominant motif. Here, in the original Arabic and 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's English translation,<sup>18</sup> is the verse in question.



٢٣- الرجال قوامون على النساء  
بما فضل الله بعضهم على بعض  
وإما أنفقوا من أموالهم  
فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَانِتَاتٌ حَفِظَتْ لِلْغَيْبِ  
بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ  
وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ  
وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ  
وَإِضْرِبُوهُنَّ  
فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ

Seek not against them  
Means (of annoyance)  
For Allah is Most High,  
Great (above you all).

The first presenter begins her analysis of this text by acknowledging that this verse appears to construct a hierarchal relationship in the context of marital relations. Certainly most who have translated it into English have made this assumption. But in her view there are several mitigating factors which challenge this more traditional interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

First, the word, *ir-rajul*, is used to describe males as opposed to the Arabic word for husbands. This, says the first presenter, is an indication that the verse is addressing men and women in a more general sense. That the Qur'an normally uses a dual form for husband and wife gives added weight to this argument.<sup>20</sup> On this basis it is not legitimate to interpret this as a text dealing with the relationship between husbands and wives. It is about gender roles in society as a whole.

The most problematical word in this text is *qawwamun* which 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali translates as "protectors and maintainers," as in, "men are the protectors and maintainers of women." The first presenter notes that there are at least twenty-nine or thirty different translations of this term in English, among which are "rulers, managers and supporters."<sup>21</sup> The second presenter observes that the Arabic root *q-w-m* makes reference to "standing upright" which in this form (a second form verbal noun) would suggest a causative function – "making or helping (someone) stand upright."

[T]here is something of this 'standing uprightness' and mostly what is being established, what is being upheld are the rights, the protection, the well being, the material support, etc., of women. . . . The men have a certain function with regard to women and, in my opinion, the men have a functional relationship to women and that relationship has to do with protecting, providing for them, etc.<sup>22</sup>

Both presenters give good reasons why this term should be understood more as "supporter" than "ruler" or "maintainer." The first notes, in particular, that although this term is often understood in terms of "ruling," that when it is understood this way, the subject is most



often God. In her view, those who lean towards this interpretation of the word are giving evidence of a patriarchal reading of the text, as it comes dangerously close to giving to males the dominant attributes of God.<sup>23</sup> A much better reading of this term would stress the supportive role of men, which in this case could best be captured by the term, “breadwinner.”<sup>24</sup>

Once this is established other assumptions follow, beginning with a reconsideration of the verb, *faddala*. This, says the first presenter, should be understood in reference to bread-winning, with God “blessing” some more than others in this role.<sup>25</sup> “Others,” (*ba’din*) in this case, should not be seen as a necessary reference to women, i.e., God “preferring” or “blessing” men more than women. This is not, says the second presenter, an “ontological value judgment.”<sup>26</sup> It is, rather, a comment on the reality of “what is.” Some people are better economic providers than others; more “blessed” in this way. Thus, a better translation would be: “God has made some better providers than others.”

The presenters turn next to the role God has proscribed for women which is related to what is unique to their gender – the ability to bear children. The first presenter becomes creative at this point. She notes that the verb, *qanita*, which has often been understood as referring to a wife’s obedience to her husband, could more properly be understood in relationship to an Arabic word which was used by the Bedouin for “water carriers.”<sup>27</sup> The reference in this case would be to women who are vessels carrying their children, i.e., women are “child carriers” as opposed to “devoutly obedient”. What is being “guarded”, then, by “righteous women,” are the children who are “hidden” within their wombs. The second presenter does not refer to *qanita* in this way, but essentially makes the same point; given the unique role of women as child bearers, which takes them out of the work force for varying lengths of time, men are called upon to bear

special responsibility for familial and societal provision.<sup>28</sup> This is a part of the created roles God has assigned to men and women as mutually responsible agents in the *ummah*.

What these two presenters are proposing is that this verse has less to do with establishing hierarchal relationships than enjoining men and women to live up to their unique gender-based responsibilities in a mutually beneficial way. Even the most problematical part of the text – the reference to men “beating” women (another mistranslation, say the two presenters<sup>29</sup>) – has to be read in this light; as an injunction for women to take their childbearing role seriously (envisioning here the possibility that women might possibly rise up in revolt against this responsibility).<sup>30</sup> In the last analysis, however, it must be understood that the primary audience for this verse are men, who need to be reminded of their responsibilities even more than women.

This verse is directed towards men. This biological function or reproduction is not by choice. . . . The men don't have anything like that so the Qur'an explicitly reminds them of their relationship in society to other beings.

### **Underlying Assumptions**

What we observe here is an approach to the Qur'anic text which rests on common assumptions made by the group of scholars under consideration here; a group which includes such prominent thinkers and activists as Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, Asma Barlas and Nimat Hafez Barazangi. All share a common belief in the inspired nature of the Qur'anic message, which they accept as “an *ayah* (sign) for humankind, a reminder of God;”<sup>31</sup> all believe the unadulterated message of the Qur'an on gender-based issues has been misinterpreted and misapplied by a male-dominated interpretive tradition; all believe that women need to be included in the interpretive process in order to recover the more inclusivist message of the Qur'an.<sup>32</sup> This is in contrast to other more secularized Muslim feminists who put the onus for

women's subjugation on the Qur'an itself. Asma Barlas, reflecting the viewpoint of the previously mentioned group of scholars, makes it clear that this does not reflect their perspective.

I am always disheartened to hear progressive Muslims claim, (dis)ingeniously, it seems to me, that "Islamism is Islamism," as a young Algerian feminist puts it in a critically acclaimed film shown recently in the West. To identify Islam inseparably with oppression is to ignore the reality of misreadings of the sacred text.

### **A Unified Message**

Asma Barlas builds her case for a more inclusive reading of the Qur'anic text on three basic assumptions about God's Qur'anic self-disclosure upon which the Islamic message is (or should be) built: "Divine Unity, Justness and Incomparability."<sup>33</sup> God's unity gives lie to any suggestion that males should assume a gender-based dominion over females, as that would give them an authority that belongs to God alone. This must "be rejected as an insufferable heresy."<sup>34</sup> The fact that God is inherently just in God's dealings with humankind, male and female alike, means that "as a hermeutical principle . . . the Qur'an cannot condone . . . justifying women's subordination to men."<sup>35</sup> Finally, God's incomparability means that there is "no reason to hold that God has any special affinity with males,"<sup>36</sup> as though males are the crown of creation. In these assertions she reflects a basic hermeutical principle which is common to the writings of all the scholars being reviewed here. All stress the incompatibility of any reading of the Qur'an which violates what they believe to be its essential message of divine unity and justice. We have seen how this guided the exegetical work of the two presenters at the 1990 conference. We see it, as well, in what Riffat Hassan considers to be the most crucial task of the gender jihad – a reconsideration of the creation texts of the Qur'an.

I consider this issue to be more basic and important, philosophically and theologically, than any other in the context of man-woman equality, because if man and woman have been created equal by Allah who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time.<sup>37</sup>

## Reconsidering the Qur’anic Creation Texts

In considering the Qur’anic creation accounts these scholars warn, first of all, against interpreting the text in an atomistic way; ie., in a way that fails to take into consideration the “internal coherence and consistency”<sup>38</sup> of the Qur’anic message. What is needed, instead, says Amina Wadud, is a “hermeneutics of *tawhid*.”<sup>39</sup>

Rather than simply applying meanings to one verse at a time, with occasional references to various verses elsewhere, a framework may be developed that includes a systematic rationale for making correlations and sufficiently exemplifies the full impact of Qur’anic coherence.<sup>40</sup>

This approach, says Asma Barlas, is suggested by the Qur’an itself as seen in Surah 15: 89-93, which ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali translates as:

And say: “I am indeed he  
That warneth openly  
And without ambiguity,” –

(Of just such wrath)  
As We sent down  
On those who divided  
(Scripture into arbitrary parts) –

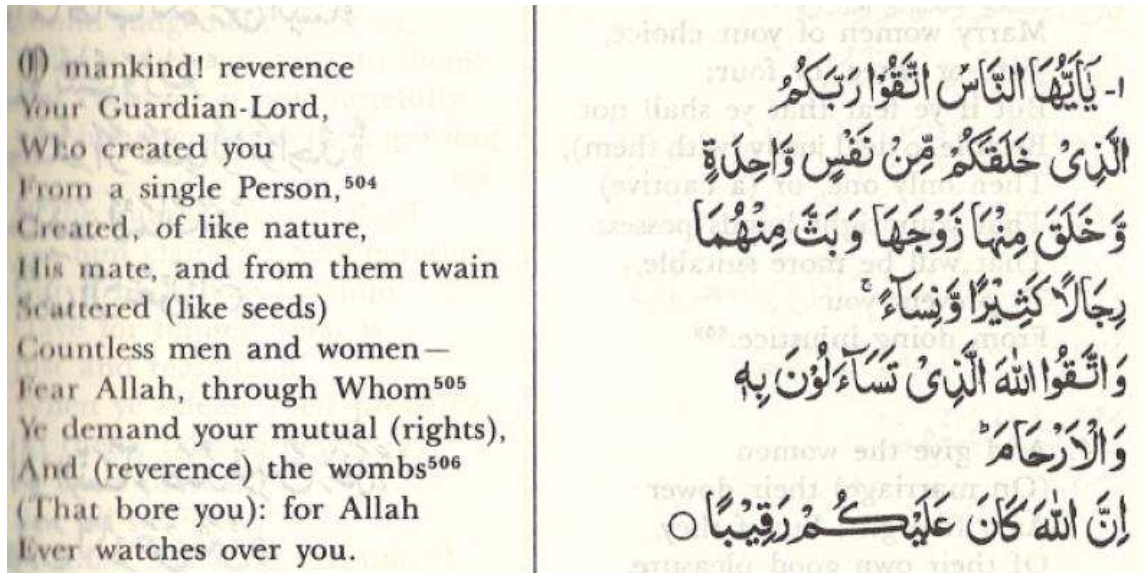
(So also on such)  
As have made the Qur’an  
Into shreds (as they please).

Therefore, by thy Lord,  
We will, of a surety,  
Call them to account,  
For all their deeds.<sup>41</sup>

This thematic approach to the Qur’an becomes most crucial in the interpretation of the cluster of verses which make reference to the creation of human beings, as it determines that no one verse should be interpreted without reference to the others. The key verse here is Surah 4:1

which expresses what Asma Barlas considers to be “the most radical of the Qur’an’s teaching”<sup>42</sup> in its reference to the creation of men and women from a single *nafs* (self).<sup>43</sup>

Amina Wadud notes that there are three key Arabic words used in this verse to express a unique Qur’anic ontology: *min* (from), *nafs* (which among its several meanings is “self”) and *zawj* (most often translated as “spouse” or “mate”).<sup>44</sup> Here is the verse in question in its original Arabic and ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali’s English translation:



The importance of these three words is seen in the varied ways in which they can be, and have been, interpreted. The Arabic word, *min*, is important as it can be used either “to imply the extraction of a thing from other thing(s)” or to speak of something being “of the same nature as”<sup>45</sup> something else. Wadud notes that the traditional interpretation usually picks up on the first meaning. Here she makes reference to al-Zamakhshari’s commentary which relies on the biblical version of the creation story to substantiate his opinion that the woman (which he identifies as the *zawj*) was extracted out of (from) the man, suggesting in this way that the female is a derivative creature.<sup>46</sup> Wadud counters this by noting that similar occurrences of the phrase in Surahs 16:82 and 42:11 show that it is much best to interpret it: “of the same nature as.”<sup>47</sup>

The Arabic word, *nafs*, also has alternative meanings,<sup>48</sup> but in this case, says Amina Wadud, “self” best captures what is intended. What’s even more important is noting that *nafs* (which is grammatically feminine) should be understood to be “neither masculine nor feminine, forming, as it does, an essential part of each being, male or female.”<sup>49</sup> This is what Asma Barlas refers to as “the most radical message of the Qur’an” – that male and female are created from a single substance (*nafs*), signifying in this way a common “human-ness” that constitutes a necessary mutuality.

As the Qur’an describes it, humans, though biologically different, are ontologically and ethically-morally the same/similar inasmuch as both women and men originated in a single Self, have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair.<sup>50</sup>

The final critical word, *zawj*, must be read in the context of this creation from a single *nafs*. It is not necessary in this case to interpret it as a reference to the female, as has been the case with classic *tafsir* literature. For one thing, it is grammatically masculine; for another, there is no indication in the verse itself that the *zawj* needs to be identified with either the male or the female expressions of the *nafs*. The gender here, as is the case with the *nafs*, is mysteriously ill-defined.

We know even less about the creation of the *zawj* than we know about the creation of the original *nafs*. The Qur’an states only two things about its creation: that it is *min* the first *nafs*, and it is *zawj* in relation to that *nafs* (4:1, 7: 189, 39:6).<sup>51</sup>

What this brings to mind is the work of Michael Sells, who notes in his book, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*, that the Qur’an “uses . . . grammatical gender in a way that allows the masculine and feminine to move beyond the grammatical gender and form a kind of subtle gender interplay.”<sup>52</sup> While he doesn’t necessarily link this to the Qur’anic understanding of human gender, it certainly can be understood as a reinforcement of what Amina Wadud is saying about *nafs* and *zawj*. The “subtle gender interplay” between *nafs* and *zawj* in

Surah 4:1 becomes an affirmation of the mutuality built into creation, God making sure that we understand how vital both masculinity and femininity are to the divine purpose.

### **Creating in Pairs**

Closely related to this understanding of the creation of men and women from a single *nafs* is what the Qur'an says about the creation of "pairs." Riffat Hassan discusses this in reference to sexuality, which the Qur'an identifies as a "sign" (*ayah*) of God's mercy and bounty (Q. 30: 21).<sup>53</sup> Here she refers to *zawj* in terms of a complimentary pairing where "the proper functioning of each requires the presence of the other."<sup>54</sup> The text which most clearly identifies this as part of God's creative purpose is Surah 75: 36-39, where the use of the dual, *zawjain*, prompts Hassan to say:

[M]an and woman – two sexually-differentiated human beings – created by God from a unitary source (*nafs in wahidatin*) are related to each other ontologically, not merely sociologically. The creation and sexuality of one is, thus, inseparable from the creation and sexuality of the other.<sup>55</sup>

Aysha Hidayatullah underscores the same point with reference to the whole of creation. Her text is Surah 31: 10, which speaks of God creating "every kind of noble creature, in pairs."<sup>56</sup> Clearly, says Hidayatullah, this is an essential element of God's creative purpose.

The dual organization of the sexes . . . is a focal point for Qur'anic meditation. This duality is regarded as a mercy and blessing upon human beings, who find comfort and love in their sexual partners. From such verses, Muslims learn that duality is the foundation of natural harmony. For, although the two sexes are distinct, the origin of both is the same, and their creations are complementary.<sup>57</sup>

Mona M.A.M Abdul-Fadl does not touch on Qur'anic exegesis in her article, "Revisiting the Woman Question: An Islamic Perspective," which she delivered as an address at a conference held at the University of Chicago in 1993.<sup>58</sup> However, her reflections on the seminal nature of a "*tawhidi* ethic of community"<sup>59</sup> to an ideal Islamic ethos captures well what these

other scholars have elucidated in their examination of the Qur'anic creation texts. Mutuality is the key word here, an expression of a necessary bond between male and female in their joint role as the *khalifat* (stewards) of God's creation.

The emphasis throughout in the tawhidi ethic of community . . . is clearly not on “congenital” or accidental affinities, nor on any parochiality, but it is on the voluntary and creedal dimensions in human association and moral action. Throughout too, in this view, whatever the level of inquiry, or whatever its context, women can only be validly addressed within the perspective of a holistic conception. They are never isolated; they are always part of a field of relationships and integral affinities such that there can be none of the empty subjectivity that is the hallmark of modernity, or even of post-modernity. Even where they might have gender specific concerns and interests, which are clearly legitimate and which are duly acknowledged in valorizing difference where the need and situation arise, they, women, as much as “men” are part of a whole.<sup>60</sup>

### **The Challenge: Overcoming the Assumptions of Traditional Tafsir**

Taken on face value, what these scholars are proposing appears to be well-established from the standpoint of Muslim piety, grounded as it is in a devout Muslim faith using the best exegetical methodology. But they are up against a strongly entrenched tradition of Qur'anic interpretation which challenges several of their basic assumptions. This challenge comes most strongly from those whose perceptions have been shaped by early Muslim *tafsir* which used the biblical creation account as an interpretive guide; particularly that *tafsir* which drew its inspiration from a *hadith* about the creation of Eve (*Hawwa'*) from Adam's rib and imaginative readings of the Garden temptation and “Fall”.

### **Adam's Rib**

Riffat Hassan notes that the *hadith* about Adam's rib is found in two of the most highly respected *ahadith* collections, that of Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 870 C.E.) and Muslim bin al-Hallaj (d. 875 C.E.), both traced back to the companion, Abu Harairah:



Sahih al-Bukhari: *Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked.*

Sahih Muslim: *Woman is like a rib. When you attempt to straighten it, you would break it. And if you leave her alone you would benefit by her, and crookedness will remain in her.*<sup>61</sup>

The influence of these *ahadith* on early *tafsir* is clearly seen in Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari's (839- 923 C.E.) *Commentary on the Qur'an*, where several variations on these *ahadith* are cited in the interpretation of Surah 2: 35 which al-Tabari entitles, "The Circumstances in which Adam's Wife Was Created for Him, and the Time at Which She Was Made a Means of Repose (*Sakan*) for Him."<sup>62</sup> This is followed by citations from various commentators on verse 36 which represent varying degrees of an imaginative reconstruction of the details of what is an otherwise sparse Qur'anic account of the Garden temptation story. The citation attributed to Ibn Wahb shows just how imaginative these commentators can be:

Ibn Zaid said: 'Satan tempted Eve with the tree and eventually brought her its fruit, then he made her beautiful in Adam's sight. So Adam called her out of desire. She said: "No! Not unless you come here." When he came to her, she said: "No! Not until you eat from this tree." So he ate from it and their shameful parts became conspicuous to them . . .'

He said: "Adam, from where were you approached?" He said: "From Eve, Lord." So God said: "I shall cause her to bleed once every month, just as you have caused this tree to bleed. I shall make her foolish, although I [originally] created her mild tempered. I shall make her have a painful pregnancy and childbirth, although I [originally] made her have an easy pregnancy and childbirth."<sup>63</sup>

It should be noted here that al-Tabari does not necessarily agree with the more imaginative aspects of these interpretations. His own commentary on verse 36 is prefaced with the comment that, "the soundest of these is, in our view, that which agrees with the Book of God."<sup>64</sup> But their inclusion does indicate the extent to which such interpretations had penetrated

the mental universe of the medieval Muslim community, interpretations which continue to color Muslim attitudes today.

What is clear here is the influence of the biblical creation story on traditional Qur'anic *tafsir*. The name, Eve (*Hawwa'* in Arabic) is not mentioned in the Qur'an, even though she plays a prominent role in the *tafsir* literature. The biblical account of Eve being created from Adam's rib is also not Qur'anic. Nor is there any indication in any of the Qur'anic creation accounts that Eve seduced Adam into eating the fruit from the forbidden Tree. All of this has its origin in the biblical account. M.J. Kister attributes this in large measure to the wide spread circulation of what is known as *qisas al-anbiya* (stories of the prophets) in the early years of Islam, particularly when the Muslim empire established itself in formerly Christian lands.<sup>65</sup> These stories, or rather, legends, found their way into *tafsir* literature early on as a way of filling out the sketchy nature of Qur'anic narrative material.

This huge mass of material started to infiltrate into the realm of hadith and *tafsir* early on in the Islamic period, and from the terse reports and utterances, combined with the additional material derived from other sources, a rich tapestry of lively and plastic narrative was woven.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Feminist Response**

Barbara Freyer Stowasser notes how damaging this interpretive tradition has been to Muslim women over the years as it has cemented in the Islamic consciousness a genderized inferiority for women. This is particularly true of the legends attached to the "Fall" that attributed to the daughters of *Hawwa'* "the curse of moral, mental, and physical deficiency."<sup>67</sup>

Once the *Hadith* had "recorded" the woman's guilt in humanity's primeval tragedy, the basic tenor of the *Hawwa'* story remained constant. It served as scripturalist proof of woman's lower moral, mental and physical nature, and the consensus of the learned doctors of Islam supported and perpetuated this teaching as a doctrine of the faith.<sup>68</sup>

We have already noted one aspect of our feminist scholars' response to this. It is found in their insistence on returning the interpretive tradition of Islam to the foundational source of their faith – the Qur'an—free from the accretions of traditional *tafsir* which has been, in their view, overly reliant on *ahadith* literature.<sup>69</sup> Pieterella Van Doorn-Harder notes that Muslim women in Indonesia have been taking this approach to their faith since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Whether conservative or progressive, these women are connected by their deep commitment to Islam. Their point of reference is the Qur'anic message that, according to their reading, brings “mercy for all creatures” (Q. 21: 107) and frees human beings from any oppression and discrimination due to sex, race, and ethnicity (Q. 49:13). They consider their religion to be one of their strongest weapons in the fight to improve women's conditions, since in their interpretation it preaches justice for all and equality between men and women (Q. 33: 35).<sup>70</sup>

This is the general response. More specifically the response is to challenge the validity of any and all *ahadith* which have been used to justify the relegation of women to a second class status. This is particularly true with regard to the *hadith* about Eve's creation from Adam's rib.

Riffat Hassan challenges the acceptability of the six *ahadith* which make reference to this story on the basis of two considerations which provide the test for valid *ahadith*. The first is the *isnad* which she believes to be weak. For this she gives three reasons:

1) All these *hadith* are cited on the authority of Abu Hurairah, a Companion who was regarded as controversial by many early Muslim scholars, including Imam Abu Hanifah (A.D. 700-767), founder of the largest Sunni school of law. 2) All six of the . . . *ahadith* are *gharib* (the lowest grade of Hadith classification) because they contain a number of transmitters who were single reporters. . . . 3) All of the above *ahadith* are *da'if* (weak) because they have a number of unreliable transmitters.<sup>71</sup>

Her second objection is related to the *matn* (substance) of these *ahadith* which are contrary to the explicit teaching of the Qur'an with regard to the woman's role in creation. The misogynist elements of these accounts, in her estimation, make them unacceptable.

The theology of woman implicit in the above *ahadith* is based upon generalizations about

her ontology, biology, and psychology that are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Qur'an. These *ahadith* ought to be rejected on the basis of their content alone.<sup>72</sup>

Hassan makes a strong case here for a more circumspect acceptance of suspect *ahadith* as an interpretive tool for Qur'anic exegesis. Unfortunately, she also notes that despite a common acceptance of the suppositions upon which she bases her conclusion about this or any other anti-woman traditions which have had an impact on Qur'anic *tafsir*, the battle for a more egalitarian reading of the Qur'an is far from over.

[A]ll Muslims agree that whenever a *Hadith* attributed to the Prophet conflicts with the Qur'an it must be rejected, the *ahadith* discussed in this chapter have not only not been rejected, they have in fact remained overwhelmingly popular with Muslims through the ages, in spite of being clearly contradictory to the Qur'anic statements pertaining to human creation.<sup>73</sup>

### **Concluding Observations**

We began this study with the assessment of two early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries regarding the plight of Muslim women under what they perceived to be an oppressive religious system. We noted that the contemporary women scholars whose work we have surveyed, a group of women who see themselves engaged in a "gender jihad," would find some agreement with that assessment; but not with its conclusion. Islam, they would say, is not the problem. The problem is the misinterpretation of the primary religious texts upon which Islam is grounded. Their hope for reform lies in the re-formulation of *tafsir* to recover what they believe to be Islam's inherently egalitarian message. The Qur'anic text in this case is their ally. And the case they make is a strong one.

As a religious outsider my ability to assess the validity of this enterprise is limited. Do these scholars go too far in their zeal to purge Islam of its patriarchal features? Do they step outside the boundaries not only of traditional *tafsir*, but of an authentic Islamic faith? How valid

is it for them to dismiss what the vast majority of Muslims would accept as authentically Islamic? These are difficult questions for a religious outsider to answer.

What I can take away from this, however, is a recognition that Christians, particularly Christian men, need to listen carefully to similar critiques emanating from feminists within our own tradition. The parallels are clear. Here, too, we are being challenged to re-visit patriarchal, even misogynist, readings of the Bible. My own evangelical tradition is particularly open to this accusation as our more conservative wing continues to lock women into a secondary status in the church. And they base this on what they believe to be the essential message of the Bible. But just as these Muslim women scholars challenge the status quo by drawing out the essential egalitarian message of the Qur'an, proposing that anything that contradicts this must be questioned, so the Christian status quo needs to be challenged. If an egalitarian justice is central to God's purpose for creation, as I believe the Bible affirms, then we must read the scriptures through this lens. Including women in the interpretive process in an historically male-dominated discipline in this case is not an option. It is essential for the liberation God intends for all of God's creation. We may not use the terminology of jihad to describe what is needed. But the need is the same.

John Hubers

July 6, 2007

## END NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> A.E. and S.M. Zwemer, *Moslem Women* (West Medford, Mass: The Central Committee on the United Study of Foreign Missions, 1926), p. 33.
- <sup>2</sup> Riffat Hassan, "The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition," in *Women's and Men's Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit*, ed. by Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan and Haim Gordon (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 67.
- <sup>3</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. x. Originally coined by Wadud, this term is used by other Muslim feminists to describe the task to which they have committed themselves. It is an apt description of the "struggle" in which they are engaged to bring a fresh perspective to Qur'anic interpretation.
- <sup>4</sup> "Because He is sufficient and His teaching and life adequate to meet all needs, we are bound to share Him with our Moslem sisters, for whose problems the Gospel of His grace is the only solvent." Zwemer, p. 33.
- <sup>5</sup> Asma Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an," *Women Re-reading Sacred Texts*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 117.
- <sup>6</sup> Hassan, p. 81.
- <sup>7</sup> The full 260 page transcript of this meeting is available on-line in pdf. format. It can be found at the following address: <http://www.wluml.org/english/pubs/pdf/misc/for-ourselves-en.pdf>. References to this document will be designated below as: WLUML.
- <sup>8</sup> This organization has its own website. The address is: <http://www.wluml.org/english/index.shtml>.
- <sup>9</sup> WLUML, p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup> From the WLUML website: <http://www.wluml.org/english/about.shtml>
- <sup>11</sup> WLUML, p. 14.
- <sup>12</sup> Hassan, p. 66.
- <sup>13</sup> WLUML, p. 49.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 48.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 49.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 50.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 56.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989), p. 195-196.
- <sup>19</sup> WLUML, p. 56.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 58.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 69.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 58.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 71.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 60.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 71.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 61, 72.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 72.
- <sup>31</sup> Aysha Hidayatullah, "Islamic Conceptions of Sexuality" in *Sexuality and the World's Religions*, ed. by David W. Machacek and Melissa M. Wilcox (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), p. 261.
- <sup>32</sup> Nimat Hafez Barazangi believes this to be a central issue in the battle for equality. She ties this to the Qur'anic teaching on the human "vice-regency" of creation.  
[W]oman is not a secondary principle but is a primary principle in the human pair. Therefore, women's reading and interpreting the text is long overdue and a necessary condition for their humanity and their trusteeship, ensuring the application of both the mandates and the gift of the Qur'an as well as the success of women and their community. [Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2004), p. 26].

- <sup>33</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 13.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>37</sup> Hassan, p. 70.
- <sup>38</sup> *Believing Women in Islam*, p. 16.
- <sup>39</sup> Wadud, p. xii.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> 'Ali, p. 634.
- <sup>42</sup> *Believing Women in Islam*, p. 133.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 17.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali gives five in his commentary on this verse: soul, self, person, living person; will, good pleasure. ('Ali, p. 183).
- <sup>49</sup> *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 19.
- <sup>50</sup> *Believing Women in Islam*, p. 133.
- <sup>51</sup> *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 20.
- <sup>52</sup> *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, trans. and introduced by Michael Sells (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), p. 19.
- <sup>53</sup> Riffat Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective," in *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, ed. by Jeanne Becher (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), p. 97.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>56</sup> 'Ali, p. 1035.
- <sup>57</sup> Aysha Hidayatullah, "Islamic Conceptions of Sexuality," in *Sexuality and the World's Religions*, ed. by David W. Machacek and Melissa M. Wilcox (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), p. 262.
- <sup>58</sup> Mona M.A.M Abdul- Fadl, "Revisiting the Woman Question: An Islamic Perspective," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, LXXXIII, No. 1 and 2 (Winter-Spring, 1993), 28-60.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>61</sup> *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, p. 101.
- <sup>62</sup> Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir Al-Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur'an: Being an Abridged Translation of Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an*, introduction, notes and trans. by J. Cooper. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 245.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- <sup>65</sup> M.J. Kister, "Legends in tafsir and hadith Literature: The Creation of Adam and Related Stories," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. by Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 82.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- <sup>67</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 30.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>69</sup> Nimat Hafez Barazangi, citing Isma'il R. Al Faruqi, notes that "it is not because of the Prophet Muhammad that Muslims accept the Qur'an; rather it is because of the Qur'an that they accept the authority of the Prophet. What happened is that Muslims, to a large extent, reversed the order when they idealized the Prophet and his extrapolation on the Qur'an, his Sunnah. (Barazangi, p. 28)
- <sup>70</sup> Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 7.
- <sup>71</sup> *Women's and Men's Liberation*, p. 78.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80,
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

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