The Renewed Woman Of American Islam: Shifting Lenses Toward 'Gender *Jihad?*'

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New models of female Islamic leadership are taking shape within Sunni Islam. In response to the modern challenges to Islam, Muslim women are sustaining, resisting, adjusting or changing their historical roles within contemporary American Muslim circles.[1] Three exemplary Muslim women, Amina Wadud, Amira Sonbol and Sharifa Alkhateeb, are of particular interest in their efforts to renegotiate the very basis of Islamic leadership by adding authoritative female voices. Although these women work in different professional fields, the force of their contributions lies in the authority of a reinterpreted Qur'ān that they have used to formulate new ideas about women, gender and Muslim society, ideas that cannot easily be contested by the long-standing androcentric perspective of traditional Islam.[2]

Problematizing Islamic Leadership

Is there a difference between Islamic leadership and female Islamic leadership? When we speak of Islamic leadership and female Islamic leadership, are we speaking in dichotomous terms, as though the first expression denotes a male bastion of activity and the second a leadership exclusively for females? Is Islamic leadership, in short, gendered? Ideally, there are forms of Islamic leadership that are not fundamentally gender specific with respect to which sex can or must exercise authority within a community, i.e. narrating a tradition of the Prophet.

Practically speaking, however, traditional Islam has designated most forms of leadership to one sex or the other. Men, for example, have retained the right to lead congregational prayers, while women historically have been able to testify as single witnesses about issues related to women, i.e. childbirth. Yet, herein lies the problem with Islamic leadership—despite the range of legitimate leadership possibilities in theory, the way in which leadership has come to be exercised in Muslim communities, both within and outside the United States, follows the models developed in the early tradition. That is, with regard to issues related to Islam in general, males have retained the right to lead the community; with issues related specifically to women, women have retained the right to lead other women. In fact, 'Islamic leadership' comes to represent the invisible construct, certainly assumed to be masculine, to which the qualifier 'female' must be added in order to shift the focus from larger issues of Islam to issues exclusive to women. Put simply, in those situations in which a woman becomes a Muslim leader in a Muslim community, she is a leader largely, if not solely, because of her activism in relation to women's issues, and is very rarely accepted as contributing to larger issues of Islam. This type of leadership reifies a traditional Muslim gender scheme—a set of social rules that relegate one set of activities to men and another to women—so that women feel socially compelled to legitimate their activism by focusing on women's or female-oriented issues (i.e. education, social work, etc.). Rarely are Muslim women leaders with regard to non-gendered issues. Clearly, the notion of Islamic leadership itself has, to this date, been quite gendered.

The work of the aforementioned three women, however, illustrates that new models are beginning to emerge. While the leadership of Amina Wadud, Amira Sonbol and Sharifa Alkhateeb is certainly derived from the pioneering work each has done in confronting issues relevant to women in Muslim communities, each has based her work upon the authority of Islamic sacred scripture in making claims of gender equality. 'Gender *jihād*' (or struggle in the name of God toward socially recognized and institutionalized gender parity) forces a reconfiguration of the traditional Islamic paradigm, not because it pits the category of woman against that of man, but precisely for the opposite reason. 'Gender *jihād*' seeks greater complementarity between the sexes, and is based on the Qurʾān. In short, it is a struggle for gender parity in Muslim society in the name of divine justice; it is a struggle to end a long-standing gender regime that has paralyzed Muslim women, preventing them from being Muslim leaders without having to add the qualifier "female" or "woman." In fact, 'gender *jihād*'—

which all three of these women undertake—calls into question the very legitimacy of Islamic leadership as a male-dominated sphere of activity. Their work changes the playing field and the game-book definition of who can be a player, who can be a legitimate Muslim leader. In changing the paradigm of how we talk about gender in Islam, the contributions of these women force a change in the way in which we speak about Islam and Islamic leadership in general.

Wadudian Hermeneutics

Amina Wadud is currently a professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. As an African-American, Wadud, like many American converts to Islam, sought refuge from the many social contradictions within American society. After converting, however, she quickly came to see that the terms "Islam" and "Muslim" mean different things to different people, and that practice lags far behind theory, particularly when it comes to gender parity. To address this crucial problem, as a graduate student in the late 1980s at the University of Michigan, Wadud began the research for what would become her pioneering work, ***Woman and Qur'ān: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective.***[3] Since its publication in Malaysia in 1992, ***Woman and Qur'ān*** has been translated into Indonesian (in 1994) and Turkish (in 1997). Also noteworthy is the fact that the book reached number one on a best-seller list in a Muslim newspaper in South Africa in 1994.[4]

Wadud's book does not address the topic of Islam and women, as such, nor is it a book about Muslim women.[5] Rather, Wadud presents a new hermeneutical approach to reading the Qur'ān that is female inclusive. Essentially, she arrives at a new interpretive methodology for understanding the Qur'ān. Instead of considering women in the traditional fragmentary way, by extracting verses of the Qur'ān about women and interpreting them in isolation from the rest of the Qur'ān, Wadud proposes a hermeneutics based on ***tawḥīd*** (translated as absolute monotheism or unity of God), whereby the unity of the Qur'ān, or God's Word, permeates all of its parts, so that verses about women fall into a larger holistic framework of the Qur'ān's coherence, or the Qur'anic ***weltanschauung.***

For example, in interpreting the first verse of the ***sūrah*** entitled "Women" that discusses the creation of Adam and Eve, Wadud deconstructs four key concepts (***ayat, min, nafs*** and ***zawj***) found in this verse and relates them to their larger usage within the entire Qur'ān.[6] So

effective is her hermeneutical approach that when it is applied to the narrative of creation, it is Qur'anically justified to argue that Eve was not born from the "crooked bone" of Adam, as traditionally stated by commentators relying on biblical tradition. In fact, Qur'anic revelation on this topic is either ambiguous or silent.[7] Indeed, the "crooked bone" *ḥadīth*, found in the authentic collections of both Bukhārī and Abū Muslim, raises a sensitive, if not controversial question about the *aḥādīth* deemed "genuine" that clearly contradict the Qur'anic intent of gender equality.[8] Eve was created *from* the same *soul*, and, thus, was not simply Adam's *mate*, but was really the other congruent half of the pair. The Qur'ān states explicitly that everything in creation is paired. Thus, instead of starting with a flawed female prototype, humanity descends from a Qur'anically vindicated Eve who is Adam's gender equal by virtue of a gender-neutral soul that God breathes into all humanity equally. Eve is physically and spiritually perfected, like Adam, to become God's vicegerent.[9]

Because women were excluded from the foundational discourse that established the traditional paradigm for what it means to be Muslim, women have been relegated to the role of subject, but without agency.[10]

> In the final analysis, the creation of the basic paradigms through which we examine and discuss the Qur'ān and Qur'anic interpretation were generated without the participation and first representation of women. Their voicelessness during critical periods of development in Qur'anic interpretation has not gone unnoticed, but it has been mistakenly equated with voicelessness in the text itself.[11]

By excluding the female voice in scriptural or religious commentary, Muslim exegetes talk about Muslim women as subjects, while ascribing their own (male) experiences to the female subject in the interpretive process. In order to rectify the situation, Wadud, first, relies exclusively on the Qur'ān to establish a definitive criterion for evaluating the differences between "text" and "context" (between what is intended in the Qur'ān and what is actually practiced in Muslim society). Armed with this Qur'anic criterion, she argues for the intended reading of the text, particularly in those instances in which Muslim contexts have failed to reach the Qur'anic intent, which, more often than not, fall in the domain of gender equality.

Second, with this Qur'anic criterion in hand, Wadud challenges the underlying paradigmatic basis of Islamic thought that grants primacy to males in favor of a more gender equal paradigm. It is not enough for modern Qur'ān commentators to simply "add women and stir,"[12] or to integrate the subject of woman into the interpretative process when textu-

ally creating a just social order while at the same time ignoring her agency. Wadud shows that a hermeneutic approach to interpreting woman in the Qur'ān must, without question, include women as active agents in both the intellectual and physical creation of that social order. In challenging the traditional paradigm, she re-imbues woman with her full humanity and moral agency as *khalīfah* (or God-appointed vicegerent), as is directly stated in the Qur'ān, as well as creating a niche for a female interpretive presence. In the process, woman regains her lost agency in the Islamic interpretive process; she is now both subject and agent instead of subject without agency.

In linking Qur'anic ideas, syntactical structures, principles, and themes together into one holistic methodology, Wadud's hermeneutical approach as a Qur'anic methodology is not entirely new. Her work follows a long tradition of modernist scriptural *tafsīr*, or commentary, though it is similar to the new Qur'anic epistemologies. Her work should not be confused with the classical approach to Qur'anic *tafsīr*.[13] The aim of all *tafsīr* is to disclose the Qur'ān's norms to the faithful, to explicate in detail in what manner they were called to discern truth and achieve goodness.[14] Yet, modernity has inspired a number of new and different approaches to the problem of the Qur'ān's eternal nature versus its day-to-day cultural specificity (approaches that are now most often written in the form of theoretical treatises, like Wadud's, rather than Qur'anic commentary).[15] Following in the footsteps of modernist scholars who have characteristically sought reform based on the value system of the Qur'ān as a whole in order to derive new guidance consonant with the present, Wadud assumes the right to *ijtihād* (individual interpretation or scripture) by differentiating between two textual levels *in* the Qur'ān. These are the historically and culturally contextualized "prior text" and the wider "megatext" of essential or culturally universal relevance.[16] Put simply, like modernist theologians and scholars before her, Wadud bases her Qur'anic hermeneutics on the critical distinction between the universals and particulars of the Qur'ān.

What is new and unique about Wadud's work is her attempt to pursue an answer to 'the woman question' by exclusively examining the concept of woman in the Qur'ān, which, she argues, "turned out to be nearly unprecedented throughout fourteen centuries of Islamic thought."[17] Wadud emphasizes "how a Qur'anic hermeneutics that is inclusive of female experiences and of the female voice could yield greater gender justice in Islamic thought and contribute toward the achievement of that justice in Islamic praxis."[18] By differentiating between two textual levels of the Qur'ān, namely the universal and the particular, *then* inserting the

ontological woman and the female exegete within this very approach, Wadud reforms a pre-existing hermeneutics so that it is gender sensitive in content and gender inclusive in application. In making this distinction of textual 'readings,' she is methodologically justified to argue that gender distinctions based on early Arabic precedent are superseded by the Qur'ān's emphasis on gender equality.[19] Wadud, in sum, is offering her work as an exegetical contribution—one that is uniquely female inclusive—to the larger historical corpus of Qur'anic exegesis. In contributing this new hermeneutical model, Wadud is essentially expanding and moving beyond an intellectual legacy that dates back fourteen hundred years.

Sonbol's *Fatwas* [20]

A second model of Islamic leadership can be found in the work of Amira Sonbol, professor of history in Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. Born and raised in Egypt, Sonbol eventually settled in the United States after completing her doctorate in Middle East history at Georgetown University in the early 1980s.

In her 1996 edited volume of eighteen essays entitled *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, Sonbol, along with other historians, challenges a number of critical concepts related to women, Islamic law and the coming of modernity to Muslim society.[21] Addressing the issue of Middle Eastern culture in general, and Islam in particular, Sonbol sets out in this volume to challenge Western essentialist perceptions of Muslim women based on old preconceptions about Islam that are *necessarily* inimical to women's rights. One need only recall that of the historical discourses on "the veil," all of which have falsely served to define the status of Muslim women, the one that stands out most in the Western imagination depicts the veil as Islam's way of keeping Muslim women oppressed, enslaved, passive and illiterate. The power of social discourse is indeed far reaching, especially in cases when such a discourse is not reflected in historical reality.

To counter such misleading preconceptions of Islam and the status of Muslim women, Sonbol and her colleagues collectively examine seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *sharī'āh* (Islamic law) court documents with fresh eyes, new research methods, and new language skills. In the process, the volume sets new standards of scholarship on this topic.[22] Central to the findings therein is a conclusion that has taken many by surprise. While Islamic law has historically proven flexible and advantageous to Muslim women, modern legal reform (which was introduced into

Muslim countries as nationally-applied secular and European-modeled "rational" laws) has *not* inspired positive changes in the legal situation of Muslim women.

> The *sharīʿāh* that came into being after the modernization of law and the reform of courts is different from the previous one in that it was designed to favor the new hegemonic order coming to power as part of the nation-state structure. It is a mistake to believe that the *sharīʿāh* code applied by nation-states in the modern period is simply a vestige of the past and hence to regard the traditional laws as the cause for the present subjugation of women, when in fact the causes of subjugation are located in the modern reforms and the handling of personal laws.[23]

This volume directly addresses the question of whether Islamic law really is inimical, by its very nature, to women's rights by looking at how Islamic law was actually interpreted and applied in historical contexts.

These scholars find that Muslim women of different Muslim countries, in fact, were historically better positioned when the law was based on the more flexible and evolving legal system of Islamic jurisprudence than on the more rigid codified secular law. They had more input with regard to personal status laws within this legal system. In proving this, Sonbol considers the issue of gender violence in one of her contributing articles to the volume.[24] She is particularly interested in changes brought to the lives of Egyptian women as a result of the change to legal reform in the modern period. Rape (which was recognized as such in premodern Islamic courts and was dealt with accordingly) was, in the modern period, codified not with personal status laws where Islamic law was applied, but rather under criminal law, where secular codes were applied. As a result of this change in legal codification, judges followed modern laws that were more lenient, and often preferred to deal with such cases under titles that made the offense more acceptable.[25] Writing elsewhere on the issue of wifely obedience to the husband *(ṭāʿa)* under nineteenth century marriage contracts, Sonbol similarly concludes that the policies applied and the conditions laid down for marriage by the state were really based on new laws established as part of nation-state building, and not on Ottoman-style *sharīʿāh.*

> . . . the modern judge has been given new powers; it was formerly his prerogative to force the wife to remain with the husband if he did not agree with her reasons for a divorce. But state laws have gone much further than that; they actually give the husband full right to his wife's 'person,' physically, sexually and mentally. The state has become an instrument by which a wife is delivered legally through the courts and,

> until very recently, physically delivered by the police into the custody of her husband. The new coercive measures have also defined a new institution to ensure a husband's right to his wife. This is known as *bayt al-ṭāʿa*, unheard of before the last decades of the nineteenth century.[26]

It was precisely through this "pick and choose" method used by modern judges of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) sources that "added state power to male-biological power to ensure the superior control by men over women. In this the state acted as a male patriarch, extending and enforcing male-power."[27] Thus, the secular legal codes that were established in the twentieth century constrained personal status laws which proved less "progressive" than theoretical works about modernization (commonly found in Middle East women's studies) contend.

Underlying this argument is a challenge to the theoretical viewpoint that sees modernity, modernization and the West as *necessarily* "progressive" for Muslim women and Islamic law as backward and oppressive, especially with regard to women. In fact, this volume directly attacks modernization theory by showing its methodological limitations. In order to prove that Islam presently subjugates women, modernization theoretical studies rely exclusively on historical textual proof by looking strictly at traditional commentary from the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth* (or Prophetic sayings), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and other religious texts. Such studies never examine the *actual* contexts to see if in fact these religious texts reflected historical reality. Like Wadud, then, Sonbol differentiates between the interpretive text and historical context, but with a significant difference in meaning.[28] In making this crucial distinction, Sonbol finds that the actual lives of Muslim women in premodern Muslim societies were freer and less oppressed than religious texts suggest, precisely because Islamic jurisprudence was not static or unchanging. Rather, such law was constantly being reinterpreted to meet the challenges that confronted women. This is not to suggest that modernization had no positive impact on Muslim women.

> There is no question that modernization has changed the situation of Muslim women dramatically and that the status of women has become one of greater openness and less seclusion. However, it should be emphasized that women in premodern Islamic society were quite dynamic and participated in decisions regarding legal and personal status. ..[however] the historical transformations of the last two centuries, although allowing women a greater public role, actually brought about a general deterioration in social maneuverability, especially for women.[29]

It is this argument, namely that Islamic law was more flexible and malleable in addressing women's grievances in this period than during the

modern period, when it was constrained by the encroaching nation-state, that clashed with received scholarly wisdom at the time of the book's publication. Such a clash made the volume a real contribution, epistemologically and methodologically, to Middle Eastern history and women's studies, as observed by Elizabeth Fernea.

> That is what Amira Sonbol is doing in her work, looking backward and forward in time at women's legal and economic positions. New research methods, new language skills, new scholars, often women like Sonbol herself, are beginning to change the way Middle Eastern history is viewed, to animate and deepen serious women's studies across the globe. This is a hopeful and encouraging trend.[30]

Indeed, Sonbol's volume constitutes a real change in scholarship on women and Islamic law.

Sonbol goes further than merely re-evaluating the historical past to vindicate Islam's single-handed role in subjugating women in academic scholarship, though this task is itself noteworthy. Because of her extensive knowledge of *sharīʿāh,* she, like Wadud, has participated in the interpretive process itself, here in the realm of Islamic legal formulations. In this volume, Sonbol embarks on a mission similar to that of Wadud, namely to formulate a female-inclusive interpretation of the Qurʾān, particularly of the chapter on women *(Sūrat al-Nisāʾ)*.[31] Like Wadud, moreover, Sonbol draws from the works of medieval Muslim exegetes, as well as contemporary conservative scholars, in order to show the limitations of such discourse, particularly in light of modern changes in Muslims' social contexts, values and thinking. Through her own re-reading of this chapter of the Qurʾān, she arrives at a more gender-equal idea of woman with the aim of making Islam more relevant, especially to women. Integral to her reading—as to that of Wadud—is the attempt to make the Qurʾān *the* primary source of Islamic legal formulations, which implies a concomitant de-emphasis on *aḥādīth* and *israiliyyat* that either contradict or have no basis in the Qurʾān. That is, in giving the Qurʾān its rightful authority in deciding what is Islamic, Sonbol endows her reading with a legitimacy that poses a biting challenge to established (male) interpretations based primarily on non-divine sources.

Furthermore, Sonbol's 'gender *jihad*' has led her to work actively in the arena of legal reform. She, along with several other Egyptian women, helped change the rape laws in Egypt. She has also contributed to discussions of legal reform in Jordan. Her ideas on Islamic law uncovered the fact that many of the modern laws in the Egyptian legal system came from French, not Islamic law. Unlike French legal codes, Islamic law did not

protect the rapist from punishment. Thanks to their activism, Egypt is now revising its laws so that the offense of rape is punishable by death. In the past, only gang rapists were sentenced to death. Sonbol contributes through her volume, articles and scripturo-legal interpretation a perspective of Muslim women, Muslim societies and Islamic law that challenges the longstanding authority of archaic academic methodologies, Muslim exegetical commentaries and contemporary Islamic legal formulations. In the process, she contributes her perspective to a legacy of Islamic law in hopes of expanding the parameters of Islamic legal orthodoxy.

Alkhateeb: A '90s Kind of Leader

The third and final model of Islamic leadership is exemplified by the impressive activism of Sharifa Alkhateeb. Born in Philadelphia to a Yemeni father and Czechoslovakian mother, Alkhateeb was raised exclusively in North America. She received her B.A. at the University of Pennsylvania in English literature and her master's in comparative religion from Norwich University. She is currently vice-president of the National American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW), having serving as its president upon its creation in 1983.

The Council was created in reaction to the disillusionment and alienation experienced by Muslim women in American-Muslim organizations that were predominately led by men. Like Wadud and Sonbol, Alkhateeb seeks a niche for a female voice uncensored and unmediated by male interpreters. "Defining what is Islamic," argues Alkhateeb, "is a matter that must include women."[32] By forming NACMW, Alkhateeb validated Muslim women's experiences by providing a forum in which they could discuss women's issues while offering an Islamic solution to their problems. More importantly, however, NACMW was founded for the purpose of educating women, providing them with more Islamic knowledge, in order that they may gain greater control over their lives. This organization's raison d'être is not so much to address problems as a community of women as to train each individual woman to be her own person. To this end, NACMW's objectives include:

> Educating Muslim women about Islam from original sources, helping women develop and act upon their own self-concept, helping women become confident and strong as individuals and as members of their families, and helping women to connect to the larger American society in a contributory way.[33]

Many of the members of NACMW are either converts to Islam or immigrants who acquired their knowledge of Islam second- or third-hand; many do not read the Qur'ān directly. Thus, re-educating these women in basic Islamic knowledge is essential to achieving NACMW's stated goals. "Once the knowledge level of women is raised," says Alkhateeb, "their consciousness and, thus, their self-concept will be raised to such a level as to preclude anyone suppressing, misusing or limiting their growth."[34]

By encouraging women to involve themselves directly with Qur'anic text, NACMW empowers these women to change the unfortunate realities in which they live, realities that many times are a function of their own ignorance of Islamic scripture. For instance, many members of NACMW entered the organization unaware that the money they earned was self-entitled money that did not have to go, by legal right, toward maintaining the home. Through training programs, Qur'anic study circles, and written materials, NACMW teaches women to translate their newly acquired knowledge of the Qur'ān and Islam into the most basic Islamic social skills. It is not enough to simply know; NACMW members believe this knowledge must be put into action. For example, members are taught such things as how to talk to a husband or family member without compromising their own opinion, and how to create a gender-balanced marriage contract. In teaching a woman to be her own person, NACMW seeks to undo longstanding traditions that have kept Muslim women handicapped in the name of Islam by teaching them how to Qur'anically contest authority without being rebellious against God.

Equally important, as the first national Muslim organization that made domestic violence and violence against children a topic of a national conference, NACMW has challenged the traditional model of Muslim organizations in America. This is not only because it is exclusively female led and membered. Also significant is that this organization has been unafraid to address taboo issues, such as domestic violence (including sexual, verbal and psychological abuse). In fact, in 1993, NACMW, under the presidency of Alkhateeb, conducted a survey about violence against women. This survey included questions which had never been asked of Muslim women before.[35] In addition to educating Muslim women about Islam, NACMW encourages them to be active in the public sphere. NACMW's assistance in securing low-interest loans for members interested in embarking on economic pursuits has been significant in this regard. Understanding that women's active participation in the community is an Islamic obligation is central to creating a gender equal Muslim social order.

In addition to her work in the NACMW, Alkhateeb has participated in an impressive array of activities—a reflection of her wide reaching 'gender jihad.' In 1994, she convened a national retreat to study the connection between the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. This ultimately led to her participation, along with the Muslim women's Georgetown Study Project (another organization founded by Alkhateeb), in a panel at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. The NACMW, as an independent organization, itself participated in five panel discussions at the Beijing conference. Finally, in 1998, she presented on Islam and girls' education in the First World Conference sponsored by the White House and USAID. In fact, she is often invited to the White House to consult on matters of Islam and Muslim women, and has been instrumental in challenging prevalent misconceptions about Islam on Capitol Hill, such as the common assumption that Islam justifies radicalism and terrorism.

Besides women's issues, Alkhateeb is interested in diffusing myths about Middle Eastern culture. She worked as an Intercultural Trainer of Teachers in Fairfax County public schools, where she taught Middle Eastern culture to public school teachers. She has also been a television producer and hosted "Middle Eastern Parenting Monthly Program," a television program designed to help bridge the gap between home and school for parents of Middle Eastern backgrounds. Clearly, Alkhateeb does not focus solely on women's issues; her views of women's Qur'anic responsibility to the larger community has led her to focus equally on the larger issues of Islam. In sum, through her activism—primarily with regard to education—Alkhateeb has endeavored to change the paradigm of how Islamic leadership itself is socially manifested by providing a model of unprecedented female leadership based primarily on the Qur'ān.

Women As Modern Islamic Reformers

What do these women and their work share that allows one to collectively view them as new models of Islamic leadership? First and foremost, these women's *taqwa*, or God consciousness, constitutes the basis of their individual sacred missions, a faith that engenders a type of thinking about God and His intended plan that often translates into a mission of social reform which I have called 'gender *jihad*.' Islam, after all, has for centuries witnessed the coming and going of countless Muslim reformers seeking to make Islam more consonant with contemporary life, precisely because

their faith in God and the initiative which that faith inspires prompts such individuals—regardless of sex—to establish God's will on earth. That women can, and should, be counted among these (male) reformers is proven by the very work of the three women presented here. The liberation that these women seek through their reform efforts is predicated exclusively on the Qur'ān.

Second, these women have created a female presence not simply within public space, i.e. within the Muslim community, but also and more importantly within divine space, i.e. within Islamic orthodoxy. It is not simply because these women have been engaged in the public sphere that I have isolated them as new models of Islamic leadership; it is that their struggles for God's cause has effected a real change in Islamic worship. These women have introduced a female presence and role in the scriptural and legal interpretative process of how to worship. Each creates a paradigm of self or model of individual female identity that ultimately renegotiates the paradigm of collective self, or model of collective identity as a community. In re-forming women's issues, these women end up reforming Islam in unprecedented ways.[36] This leads to the final point of how these women's contributions have collectively provided the Muslim community with new models of Islamic leadership, namely the production of new Islamic knowledge.

These models contest the status quo of gender inequality by shaking the very foundations of knowledge, of what constitutes "truth." These women epistemologically reorient or shift the lens from viewing religious knowledge as authoritative and incontestable to viewing it instead as constructed, value-laden and context-specific. In the process, they dismantle the traditional androcentric paradigms that have kept women out of the interpretive process. They uncover new kinds of female-inclusive knowledge about Islam that is protected by the Qur'anic principle of gender equality. After all, for these women, scriptural interpretations and legal formulations of the Qur'ān that are not gender inclusive are not comprehensive, and hence the comprehensiveness of God's message is itself compromised. Because their call for 'gender *jihad'* is based on the Qur'ān, women imbue their struggle with a religious authority that cannot easily be contested by the more conservative Muslim community. In contesting old paradigms, moreover, these women provide a blueprint for other women, as observed by Fernea, whose travels around the globe revealed a growing trend among Muslim women to challenge outdated religious paternalistic traditions.

> Everywhere I found women reordering their activities to meet new challenges from the old order. The tradition of God the Father, the tradition that men rule, is the order faced by all women who have inherited the paternalistic, monotheistic religious tradition of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This tradition is now being contested on a daily basis as women move into the public workforce beside men, and expect recognition, respect and power.[37]

That these female-inclusive Islamic formulations were created in America is related, in many ways, to postmodernist thought prevalent in this country that has allowed Muslims to be more critical of Islam and Muslims than may be possible in Muslim states. In fact, scholars such as Ali Mazrui argue that American secular society provides fertile ground for a brand of Islam that is unfettered by the cultural baggage originating in Muslim countries.[38] Sonbol puts it best by saying:

> Islam as a religion and a movement also has a lot to learn from America, freedom and individual rights are at the heart of American idealism. There is nothing in Islam to stand against such ideals and we as American Muslims can contribute a lot to our communities by leaning toward such ideals in our interpretations. Since law is so central to Islam as it is to the modern world, it makes sense for me as a modern Muslim woman and a historian to direct my work toward correcting the wrong impressions of the past, to deconstruct what they tell us is "truth" to come to fundamental and basic rights. The contribution of society can be shown through a study of historical context, and once it is clear where God's word begins and society takes over, then we can see how and when knowledge was constructed.[39]

Because Muslims in America—whether of immigrant or American origin—must formulate an Islam that makes sense to an American lifestyle, more often than not, cultural ideas of Islam are set aside. In a context where Muslims constitute the minority under secular rule, not only are Muslim women able to develop and implement their intellectual thought about Islam, they are free to export those ideas back to Muslim countries to affect change even in those communities.

In the process of de-centralizing traditional religious knowledge and appropriating the Written Word, these leaders have successfully negotiated a number of noteworthy and unprecedented achievements for Muslim women and gender equality. First, women re-gain lawful entry into scripture, law and education—the three crucial areas that authorize and legitimize Muslim leadership. By accessing these three areas, Muslim women can re-establish their individual relationship to God without the mediating help of male interpreters. A critical result of this increased

scriptural access has been the formation of various movements for legal reform, particularly in the areas of traditional divorce practices and laws of inheritance.[40] Woman can thus lead herself. Equally significant is that Islamic leadership no longer remains in the exclusive hands of Muslim men, and the qualifiers "female" or "woman" are no longer necessary to shift the discussion toward women's issues. Men and women as gender equals have equal claim to authority, since there is equal access to the power sources that legitimate that authority. By example, these three women have not only inspired other women to seize their right to contribute to the process of defining what is Islamic, but they have also reformed Islam so that it is more pluralistic. These women are not alone in this endeavor, as noted by Stowasser.[41]

A second unprecedented achievement is that these women have challenged not only the received wisdom of Islamic orthodoxy, but also that which had heretofore been unaddressed. Taboo issues like gender violence were scarcely mentioned in Muslim circles. Bringing these issues into the spotlight reflects the commitment of these women to tackle the social ills caused by gender inequality, even at the risk of being marginalized within the Muslim community. Finally, while these women admit to and accept the Islamic legacy that they inherited as Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular, they have sought through their work not only to honor this legacy, but to also move beyond it in order to meet the modern challenges of Islam.

Conclusion

"The contemporary age has brought forth a whole new Islamic epistemology where scripture-sanctioned gender paradigms play an important role."[42] Indeed, change came with the modern age and its modernist and reformist scholars.[43] I posit that the women presented in this paper should be included within this group. The contribution of these three women should be seen as part of a larger movement. Muslim women are increasingly gaining entry into the canons and are themselves partaking in scriptural interpretation and exegesis. No longer denied access to Islamic scripture, Muslim women all over the world are revising, if not rejecting, the ossified interpretations of times past while undertaking scriptural commentary of their own. That this movement has been spearheaded by Muslim women in the United States is not coincidental, for American soil has proven fertile for nurturing a more critical view of the Islamic past.

The feminine is not only very much part and parcel of Islam, it has the potential to legitimately contribute to its very orthodoxy. We only have to look into the Islamic tradition deeply enough and in the proper spirit to find female religious devotion aimed straight at the doors of heaven.

Endnotes

1. Notwithstanding the many meanings and historical contexts that the categories Islam, Muslim women, and Islamic leadership invoke, these categories are still useful analytic constructs since they are used with very specific definitions in mind. When using "Islam," I am speaking exclusively of the religion as understood, interpreted and practiced within the context of the United States, which means that American Islam is only one possible meaning of the different "Islams" that exist globally. Even within American Islam, there are subgroups worthy of acknowledgment. However, for the sake of this paper, I am limiting myself to Sunni Orthodox Islam, as practiced by the majority of those Muslims living in America—whether of immigrant or American origin. Thus, "Muslim women" refers to those female adherents within that majority Muslim group. Finally, by "Islamic leaders" I mean those individuals who are socially accepted by their followers as legitimate authorities who have, in varying degrees, interpretive power of what is or is not "Islamic."

2. Traditionalism, or traditional Islam, refers to "the mainstream conservative school of thought that views Islam as an inherited, balanced system of faith and action based on and sanctioned by scripture and its interpretation through the verifying authority of past scholarly consensus." Barbara Stowasser, "Gender Issues and Contemporary Quran Interpretation," in *Islam, Gender and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 37.

3. See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

4. *Ibid.*, xvi.

5. *Ibid.*, xv.

6. ***Ayāt*** *(sing. yah)* are empirical 'signs' that can be perceived by humankind, which are Qur'anically intended to help complete the purpose of the Book by providing guidance to humankind. ***Min*** is used for the English preposition 'from' to imply the extraction of a thing from other thing(s); it is also used to imply 'of the same nature as.' ***Nafs*** has both a common and a technical usage. The common usage translates as 'self' (and its plural, *anfus*, as 'selves'), and it is never used in the Qur'ān with reference to any created self other than humankind. The technical usage of the term refers to the common origin of all humankind. Finally, ***zawj*** is used in the Qur'ān to mean 'mate,' 'spouse,' or 'group,' and its plural *azwaj* is used to indicate 'spouses.' See Wadud, 17-20.

7. See Hibba Abugideiri, "Allegorical Gender: The Figure of Eve Revisited," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 13, #4 (Winter 1996). This article covers the narrative of creation as understood by traditional Muslim exegetes found in oft-cited *ḥadīth* commentary to show how Wadud's hermeneutical model, when applied, yields a gender-balanced reading of this allegory in general, and of Eve in particular.

8. Included as "genuine" were Prophetic traditions approved by legal-theological consensus, with the result that the authenticated *ḥadīth* came to contain strands of differing, sometimes even contradictory, traditions but which were at some time past or

contemporaneously carried by their supporters' consensus. See Stowasser, "Gender Issues," 32. I argue in my article on Eve cited above that the "crooked bone" *hadith* is one such tradition, for it clearly contradicts the Qur'ān.

9. Abugideiri, 524, 526.

10. Wadud, xi.

11. Wadud, 2.

12. A borrowed expression from Edmund M. Kern, " 'Add Women and Stir?' Teaching Women's History in Renaissance and Reformation Surveys," manuscript in preparation.

13. For a discussion of the different historical Qur'anic methodological approaches to the Qur'ān from classical to contemporary times, see Stowasser, "Gender Issues." She divides these approaches into two principal categories: the classical tradition, exemplified by Tabari and Baydawi; and modernist approaches, which are subdivided into two related categories: the modernist paradigm as employed by Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍa, and contemporary new epistemologies, as exemplified in the works of Fazlur Rahman, Ismail al-Faruqi and Wadud.

14. Stowasser, "Gender Issues," 32. The aim stated by Stowasser is to refer to medieval *tafsīr* exclusively, while I understand it to mean the aim of the entire corpus of *tafsīr* literature.

15. *Ibid.,* 38.

16. *Ibid.,* 39.

17. Wadud, ix.

18. Wadud, x.

19. Stowasser, "Gender Issues," 39.

20. A *fatwa* is a legal opinion rendered by a recognized religious authority.

21. See *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History,* ed., Amira el Azhary Sonbol (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

22. This volume (a) treats the history of women, family law and divorce with the purpose of assessing gender relations and the status of women by focusing not on ideology or discourse, but on historical specificities of different Muslim societies; (b) raises important questions about the history of women and the family that have received little attention in scholarship, such as issues of gender violence and laws pertaining to children and non-Muslim minorities; and (c) collectively proposes new methodologies and theories for understanding the history of women and the family. See Sonbol, "Introduction," in *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 14-18.

23. Sonbol, "Introduction," 11.

24. Here including rape and mental abuse.

25. See "Law and Gender Violence in Ottoman and Modern Egypt," *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History,* Amira El Azhary Sonbol, ed. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

26. Amira el Azhary Sonbol, "*Ṭāʿa* and Modern Legal Reform: A Rereading," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 9, #3 (1998), 293.

27. Amira el Azhary Sonbol, "Rethinking Women and Islam," in *Women and Empowerment: Judaism, Christianity and Islam,* ed. Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 57.

28. With Wadud, a professor of religious studies, the emphasis is on the intended text, actually on the hermeneutics of "reading" the Qur'anic text where the context provides the impetus for the necessity of such a reading. Sonbol, a trained historian, focuses on the historical context in order to gauge the application of the religious text.

29. Sonbol, "Introduction," 7.

30. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "Foreword," in *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, ed., Amira el Azhary Sonbol (New York: Syrcause University Press, 1996), x.

31. See Sonbol, "Rethinking Women."

32. Sharifa Alkhateeb, interview by Hibba Abugideiri, Sterling, VA, 18 April 1999.

33. "The North American Council for Muslim Women," Pamphlet.

34. Sharifa Alkhateeb, interview by Hibba Abugideiri, Sterling, Virginia, 18 April 1999.

35. Included in the survey were questions like, "What is the proper behavior of Muslims during war?" (This question was prompted by the atrocities of rape that occurred in Bangladesh by Pakistani soldiers), and "Do you recognize that there is such a thing as marital rape in a Muslim marriage?"

36. To facilely label these women as "feminists" or even "Islamic feminists"—a growing trend in women's studies in the Muslim world—obfuscates the real contribution these women make to religion as a whole. Indeed, the particular kind of gender *jihad* that these women wage is certainly not only against a Muslim androcentric orthodoxy, it is equally a struggle against what is essentially a racist secular-informed ideology, i.e. Western feminism. Instead, these women attempt to create a legitimate female presence that requires no legitimation by either an androcentric or a foreign discourse.

37. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *In Seach of Islamic Feminism* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 414.

38. See Ali A. Mazrui, "Islam in a More Conservative Western World," *American Journal of the Islamic Social Sciences* 13, #2 (Summer 1996).

39. Amira Sobel, private e-mail message to Hibba Abugideiri, April 21, 1999.

40. Jane I. Smith, "Joining the Debate," *The World and I* (September 1, 1997), 61.

41. Stowasser, "Gender Issues," 42.

42. *Ibid.*, 30.

43. *Ibid.*