

Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class and Gender

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# TOWARDS A QUR'ANIC HERMENEUTICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: RACE, CLASS AND GENDER

*Amina Wadud\**

From the onset, one must dispel the idea that addressing gender issues or referring to “*women*” and “*woman*” is marginal to larger considerations of civil society and current global dynamics. Double standards with regard to images and treatment of women are indicators of distorted visions of social justice. Without remorse, women are often consigned to a sub-category in the estimation and construction of the social order through which we acquire justice.

What I discuss here are some preliminary ideas about social justice. My vision of social justice is predicated upon two things: my personal experiences of inequities because of race, class and gender; and my search in the Islamic tradition, and more precisely, in the Qur’anic text, for a perspective on civil society which dispels the tendencies towards oppression and social injustice.

As my title “Toward a Qur’anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice” should indicate, I do not propose to be able to arrive there by the end of these considerations. Nevertheless, I have been engaged in this venture for quite some time and intend to continue. I will at least consider some important preliminary concerns. First, I will look at absolute justice as a philosophical and religious ideal, and then consider the relationship between these absolutes and real social systems. As a Muslim, the center of my work will be the Qur’an, from which it is possible to glean ideas about justice and about the establishment of a just social order. Furthermore, Muslim scholars have dealt extensively with this notion.<sup>1</sup> However, since social order naturally changes over time, ongoing Islamic scholarship is required to examine quite closely the relationship between the Qur’anic notions of social justice and our current global debates over justice and equity.

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1. See for example, Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (Hopkins U Press, 1984); Sayed Kotb, *Social Justice in Islam* (Maktabat Misr, John B. Hardie trans, 1945, reprint 1970); Muhammad Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur’an* (Leiden, 1960).

Since most of those involved in global discourses over human rights are concerned about 'universal' ideas, a method such as intra-Qur'anic analysis seems inappropriate and exclusive. However, from the Muslim perspective, the Qur'anic world-view provides the most efficient avenue for comprehensive alleviation of problems of oppression and should therefore remain ever present. The congruence, variance or precedence of Qur'anic theories of justice to these global discourses has not been considered for two reasons. On the one hand, many who enter into the global discourses as 'guardians of Islam' are in fact exclusivists. They shrink the Qur'anic vision to the narrowness of their own minds by perceiving it only in its most literal or fundamentalist terms. The results weaken the Qur'anic flexibility and universality. On the other hand, those who lead global discourses on human rights and social justice claiming 'universality' are also exclusivists, since they demand the removal of all specific religious affiliation as the only means for arriving at universal truths.<sup>2</sup>

Although this article will not settle this dispute, I hope to make a contribution by looking at the relationship of a Qur'anic hermeneutic of justice to the problem(s) of establishing justice in real social contexts. I am concerned that there is sometimes a contradiction between the intention of Qur'anic discourse and the development of the Islamic civilization, which has resulted in the loss of social justice—particularly for women and non-Muslim minorities.<sup>3</sup>

I will share some of the development of my direction "towards" social justice via the Qur'an, though I have yet to arrive at a complete articulation. First, I will look at how I came to consider this issue of social justice in order to clarify the urgency I feel in seeking solutions and the impetus behind my research. Then I will outline the significance of the research perspective I am adopting, look at some methodological considerations of intra-Qur'anic analysis and indicate potential results of this research as it relates to women.

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2. Robert N. Bellah, *Meaning and Modernization* and *Between Religion and Social Science* in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* 64, 237 (Harper & Row, 1976).

3. For further consideration specifically addressed to Islam and the social justice or equal citizenship of women and non-Muslim minorities in Islamic countries see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islamic Law, International Relations and Human Rights: Challenge and Response*, 20 Cornell Intl L J 317 (1987); also see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse U Press, 1990).

## HOW I CAME TO THIS PROBLEM

Every society established was conceived under the banner of a just social order. The detailed articulation of a just and equitable social order in the new Americas has few historical and literary parallels. A review of the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence is awesome and inspiring. Phrased in the most universal of languages, there is the intention to establish a just and moral social order. Yet, as a poor, Black American female, the disparity between this articulation for social justice and the actual lives of so many people in America—so many poor people, so many people of color and so many women—has led me to reconsider the relationship between social theories, social constructs, and the real experience of human beings in social contexts.

But, I am not a social scientist; I am not a political scientist: I am a theologian. Therefore, I examine these questions from a particular perspective influenced by my theological discipline. If I admit to a 'faith-centered' or 'faith-conscious' consideration of the issue of social justice—from the perspective of the church-state separation maintained, at least in theory, by the organization of the American political and constitutional system—my consideration is invalidated. I am supposed to believe that faith choice has no relationship to the issue of social organization and neither, therefore, to social justice.

Yet, it seems that a major organizing principle in the language of moral-ethical considerations like justice seems to be some indication of a transcendent component, which leads to the criteria for evaluating what is just and ethical. The US Declaration of Independence, for example, says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by *the Creator* with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . . ." Such a statement is a clear and universal articulation that well-being, human rights and justice are coordinated concepts.

Despite its overt secularism, the US organizational document did not attempt this universal demand for human rights without reference to a transcendent component: the *Creator* which endows inalienable rights. For the framers of the Declaration, and for us, justice is not simply what we humans determine to be right, just and equitable. It is an existential aspect of humanity: standardized, implemented and protected perhaps by human institutions and organizations, but not *granted* by them primordially.

Perhaps as important to my argument is the language itself in the phrase: "all men are created equal." As with all language acts, the hermeneutical aspect of the act—that is, how it is comprehended—rests both upon the faculties of the listener/reader as well as upon the linguistic items themselves *as they were intended* by the author. Our world is constructed and deconstructed on the basis of our success and failure at understanding; since what is *meant* by any statement involves the interplay of these three: mechanisms of human understanding (hermeneutics), language acts (terms, constructs, meaning, etc.) and the intent of the author. I will leave aside a direct discussion of hermeneutics, with its theories of reason and the human capacity of understanding, and apply it instead to my focus on the other two aspects—language and intent—in the term "men" from the statement "all men are created equal . . . ."

In language, the term "men" here could be a generic referent to all humankind, which would make this a universal statement, encompassing the rights and well being of humankind. This is how this statement is most commonly understood today. However, the "intent" of the potential universal utterance is revealed by the actual practices of the drafters of the document at the time of its drafting. From this historical context, we find that "all men. . ." refers only to white male property holders. Indeed, while this very document was being drafted, the most horrific slavery system known in human civilization was thriving in America. As the foundation of a free and just society was being debated, the most extreme violation of the basic human rights of African captives and descendants was simultaneously being practiced. In addition, women were denied complete and equal citizenship and remained for quite some time without access to political power, property and even civil mobility and spiritual choice. Finally, the issue of class—as indicated here by 'property holders'—was the third major component of civil inequity, yet to be justly resolved in a rapidly developed 'capitalist' nation. The disparity between this language acts as an utterance of universal import and the practical restriction to a sub-category of humanity because the intent of its authors illustrates that despite the articulation of certain ethical principles in the construction of just social systems, they can still be oppressive for reasons of race, class and gender.

The disparity between the potential of this language act and the intent of the Declaration captures the subtle problem in our tendencies towards justice. In constructing a just and moral social

order, the founders of the order often decide that justice is limited to a 'select' or specified group and therefore withhold it from all "others" outside the specified group. The psychological and historical construction of the "other" often implies a clear dichotomy with an in-group and an out-group. Although some workable allegiance might be constructed for the sake of larger mutual interests, the underlying notion that "others" are deviant adversaries remains.

Modern social systems are also constructed using some notions of otherness, and although women fall into this category, we are not clear adversaries.<sup>4</sup> Systems of gender inequity are constructed and maintained by those who love us. Our fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers, and friends relegate us to a status "other" than the one they consider to deserve full justice in the construction of social order.

Thus, inequities based on gender lie at the nexus of my consideration of concepts of justice. If the basis for justice is ontological—if we are "endowed by the Creator"—then the basis of establishing a double standard with regard to women has also been presumed to be ontological. For this reason, extensive feminist theory concentrates on the relationship between nature and nurture in the construction of perceived gender-roles.

Such perceived gender-roles—which incidentally are not constructed in isolation from social systems—can affect perceptions of self-worth. The inadequacies perceived can curtail or prohibit attempts at living a meaningful life. The creation of categories of otherness is particularly problematical for the one oppressed. Other than heroes—often martyred to the cause—can we live a life of adequate integrity when faced with systemic oppression? Some spiritual discourse romantically leans toward the notion that the one who is close to God cannot be affected by the limitations of the world; or at least, that the effects of this world of injustice will remain external and not affect self-worth and faith.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the institution of slavery as practiced in the United States proves this postulation incorrect. For its success, such a diabolical institution demanded more than mere bodily containment: it was necessary for free and equal human beings to reformulate their

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4. For further consideration of the construction of women's "other"-ness, see Alfred A. Knopf, ed, *The Second Sex* (H.M. Parshley, Alfred A. Knopf trans, 1952, reprint 1964).

5. For an in-depth discussion of this correlation between social systems and psychological consciousness, see Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (Plenum Press, 1985).

thinking until they internalized new images of themselves: from being free persons to being 'slaves.' In fact, they needed to accept being something LESS than human, if they were to live at all . . . There were alternatives: death, torture and a severe mind-body split when their inward notions of basic humanity could not be externalized.<sup>6</sup> But as generation after generation was born into slavery, and as slaves gave birth to slaves, these images surely affected the psyche. Freedom soon became a fantasy, not an imagined opportunity.

Although gender disparities lack clear adversary/ally boundaries, they are similarly unjust. They imply that the standard by which we measure all humanity and by which we determine a person's access to rights and privileges is established on the basis of one group: the males. This leaves the evaluation and consideration of females in a subcategory or deviation from the norm, a perception that can diminish the sense of self and can lead to acceptance of an inferior specified place, role, or status.

In recent years, women have been uncovering many of the implicit biases that resulted from using men as the human standard. But the universal man is deeply embedded in our lives and habits of thought, and women who deviate from his ways are still regarded as, well, deviant. . . . (T)he persistence of the normal man and the difficulty he poses for women who hope to measure up, . . . affects the evaluation of women's bodies, psychology and brains.<sup>7</sup>

Although I was born a citizen in a nation prefaced by extraordinary documents of social justice and human rights; as a poor, female descendant of an African slave, my worth as a human being has not been considered EQUAL in American political, social and economic systems. I am therefore reminded of Malcolm X, who helped me frame the discourse nearly a quarter of a century ago, when he asserted that this is not a question of access to civil liberties that an American constitution can grant or restrict; this is a consideration of a status that can only be "endowed by the Creator," and of rights that are inalienable.

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6. Research on the residual psychological effects of American slavery on the perceptions of present day African-Americans, as well as their white counterparts, still remains insufficient.

7. Carol Tarvis, *The Mismeasure of Woman* 29 (Simon & Schuster, 1992).

### A WORD ABOUT INTRA-TEXTUAL QUR'ANIC ANALYSIS AS A METHODOLOGY

How do we define, determine and implement universal human rights? How do we comprehend rights "endowed by the Creator," compute them through language acts and then implement them in real social systems? Islam is a comprehensive system and world view encompassing all aspects of life and establishing the very nature of personal identity and notions of the divine. Therefore, it would seem that such a system must also validate female experiences, developments, identity and perceptions as much as it does the male. Yet, historically, the development of Islam's basic paradigms indicates a disproportionate advantage towards male experiences, developments, identities and perceptions. I am inclined therefore to challenge these historically developed paradigms and to construct alternative methods for determining the basics in Islam, in order to draw unprecedented conclusions from them as they might apply to women.

At its most fundamental level, Islam is built upon two primary sources: the divine will articulated in a text known as the Qur'an, and the normative practices of the Prophet Muhammad whose behavior reflected and embodied the text. Since the Qur'an has an overwhelming consensus among Muslim scholars and laity as *the* central source of the Islamic world view, the text is given precedent. The centrality of the Qur'an and the consensus over that indicate why on-going Qur'anic analysis is necessary and why such an analysis is important to my consideration of women and social justice. Textual analysis cannot only help determine when Muslim societies are acting outside the parameters of a Qur'anic world-view and intent, but also can present a rationale for altering such actions.

In interpreting the Qur'an, the exegetes unanimously agree that the primary tool is *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an*: the interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an itself. Too often this tool is reduced to using a single term or verse to interpret another term or verse. In this way, a word at one place in the text can be understood or explained by a word or verse in the text at another place. For legal purposes, when one edict is mentioned or referred to in the text, it might be understood or clarified by reference to one detail or passage somewhere else in the text. The debates over *naskh* (abrogation) further complicate the issue by giving precedent to verses—no matter how restrictive—on the mere basis of



their later chronological occurrence. In other words, the use of intra-Qur'anic interpretation is atomistic and seriously limited.

Attempts at holistic Qur'anic interpretation on the basis of the Qur'anic ethos or spirit are rare, since defining clearly the parameters of such a methodology—which requires intense internalization of that spirit—has been nearly impossible. There are several precedents set in this regard however. For example, the companions of the Prophet were said to “live”<sup>8</sup> each verse they memorized rather than to merely memorize the text by rote. In addition, there is the example of Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph after the death of the Prophet. On one occasion after a particular war campaign, he refrained from taking the booty explicitly prescribed in the Qur'an, citing that to do so would violate the spirit of the Qur'an in the existing situation of hardship. Sadly, any who utter such a notion today would be considered a heretic. Muslims seem to lack faith in the possibility that the Qur'anic whole could yield something greater than its parts.

Another example of more holistic intra-Qur'anic interpretation can be found in the work of Islahi<sup>9</sup> on the concept of *nazm*: internal coherence. His methodology focuses on Qur'anic passages in their textual context. Context colors meaning, adds a myriad of possible understandings and provides for subtle nuances. Meaning in the Qur'an is more than just a single lexical item.

In my estimation, the single most under-considered aspect of holistic intra-Qur'anic interpretation is the construction of priorities based on universals rather than particulars. The development of Islamic jurisprudence, which tended to codify particulars, resulted sometimes in narrow and inflexible laws. Greater flexibility in the law might have resulted from greater reliance on the Qur'an's universal expressions. For example, the Qur'an establishes a universal notion regarding matters of dress and asserts that “the dress of piety is best.” However, *shari'ah* (Islamic law) uses the Qur'anic references to particular 7th Century Arabian styles of dress as the basis of its legal conclusion regarding modesty. Consequently wearing a particular item of dress (for example, the head-covering) is deemed an appropriate demonstration of modesty.

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8. Understood as implementing each verse into their lives.

9. Mustanir Mir, *Thematic and Structural Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Islahi's Concept of Nazm* (U Mich Microfilms Intl, 1987).

Finally, another area in the spirit of Qur'anic holism that warrants greater study is consideration of Qur'anic ellipses<sup>10</sup> and textual silences. How much understanding can we gather from the many places in the text where the Qur'an alludes to a matter, but leaves it unsaid? In a similar manner, attention needs to be focused on silences and omissions. For example, if the Qur'an constructs certain human qualities at successive levels, but omits one of the levels in another human quality constructed along the same succession, might we infer the existence of that level as well? In addition to these subtleties in textual usage and terminology, much work remains undone around the historical silencing of the female voice and the marginalization of female spiritual experiences.

I will couple these aspects of holistic Qur'anic analysis with an idea expressed by Itzutsu regarding the term *taqwa*:<sup>11</sup> although the roots for most of the lexical items used in the Qur'an are drawn from the existing Arabic language prior to and during the time of revelation, the Qur'an establishes new parameters of meaning for its key terms. Such terms must therefore be examined in their variant usage, linguistic forms, contexts and semantic fields within the Qur'an itself. If there is a discrepancy between pre-Islamic usage and Qur'anic variants, we need to ascertain the parameters established in the text. Likewise, some later interpretations of Qur'anic terms are incongruent with actual textual usage.<sup>12</sup>

With these methodological considerations as background, I will consider briefly the term *zulm* (injustice, oppression or inequity), which I chose for two reasons. First, because in Islam the notion of God is the Ultimate—pervasive and omnipotent. Yet, I discovered that He (She, It)<sup>13</sup> is categorically removed from all indications and practices of *zulm*. When the term *zulm* exists in language constructs with the word God (or other divine referents) it is ONLY to negate their correlation. The use of the negative is a significant linguistic tool for discussing the metaphysical. The nature of God as a transcendent being in reality is ineffable. It is

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10. Although not concerned with the consideration of gender justice, see Salah Salim Ali, *Misrepresentations of Some Ellipted Structures in the Translation of the Qur'an by A.Y. Ali and M.M. Pickthall*, 12 *Hamdard Islamicus* 27, 33 (Winter, 1994).

11. Toshihiko Itzutsu, *Koranic Key-Terms in History* in Toshihiko Itzutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* 36 (Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964).

12. Itzutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* at 45 (cited in note 11). "... Islam produced many different systems of thought in the post-Koranic periods. . . . Each of these cultural products of Islam developed its own conceptual system, i.e., its own 'vocabulary'. . . ." Also see Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman* 94 (Malaysia, 1992).

13. God is neither male nor female.

often discussed by negative referents: we humans are finite, God is infinite; we are mortal—limited in time and place; God is immortal—everlasting, unending.<sup>14</sup>

A cursory look at the negation of the term *zulm* with reference to God in the Qur'an indicates definitively that God does not oppress.<sup>15</sup> In other words, oppression exists because of what we do as humans. Oppression is human-made, and therefore must be human-alleviated. In addition to this divine exemption from oppression, the Qur'an also brings forth the notion that the social order should strive to reflect the divine order. Everything short of this yields injustice. The only way to justice, then, is clearly by following the divine order, since it is determined categorically that God does not oppress. To be in a god-less state is oppression. To be removed from injustice, one must be similar to God, or in the god-ful state. Justice is god-fulness, oppression is god-lessness.

The second reason for choosing the term *zulm* was my discovery that it, and other derivatives from its *z-l-m* root, occur more frequently in the Qur'an than all of the positive terms for justice combined. Although I looked in detail at such positive ethical terms as *qist*, *aadil*, and the more ambiguous term *ma'ruf*,<sup>16</sup> the term *zulm* was clearly more crucial. I am tempted to conclude from this that establishing justice in real social contexts is based on avoiding what is unjust. I concentrated on relational terms of justice rather than on ethical concepts of moral goodness and righteousness, because the latter obscures the specific nature of human to human interaction I needed to understand social justice.

This cursory look at the Qur'anic use of the term *zulm* leads me to conclude that anything which makes another human being into an object—as Martin Buber would argue, making the other an “It” instead of a “Thou” in correspondence to the perception of “I”—is incongruent with divine justice. “The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being.”<sup>17</sup> Any relationship

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14. Kenneth Burke, *On Words and The Word* in Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* 7 (Beacon Press, 1961).

15. It is also stated explicitly in the text, for example at 9:70, 10:44, 29:40, 30:9. *The Message of The Qur'an*, 272, 298, 612, 618 (Dar Al-Andalus, Ltd, Muhammad Asad trans, 1980).

16. Defined as equity, justice established, respectively.

17. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* 3 (Charles Scribner's Sons, Ronald Gregor Smith trans, 1958).

which maintains an operating principle with some human beings as the “other” can be considered unjust, and can lead to oppression.<sup>18</sup>

#### QUR'ANIC HERMENEUTICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR WOMEN

In the case of women, my aim is for justice, and my claim is that, after the death of the Prophet, Islam, as it has been practiced, has been less than just to women. The value attributed to woman, and the role or status to which she was relegated, was not equal to the value attributed to man and the role or status which he assigned himself. Although I do not think this was intentional, she has been less than fully honored as a human being. Muslims tend to respond to such categorical statements as though they are meant to imply that Islam itself is an unjust system for women. What is meant here is that the responsibility to implement the justice intended by Islam was left upon its adherents, who—like most other social groups—have not always lived up to complete gender justice. The absence of justice and equality for women in Muslim society was not the intention of Islam as established in the Qur'anic worldview, nor was it an intention of Muslim societies to dishonor women. However, when such injustice has been made apparent, we must alleviate its impact and correct its harm, rather than defend it on the grounds that it was unintentional.

A fundamental principle underlying ethical-moral systems of social justice is the principle of reciprocity, implied by articulations of various religious postulates. For example, the Prophet said, “One of you does not believe until he loves for his brother (or sister. . . ) what (or as) he loves for himself.”<sup>19</sup> The Biblical equivalent is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The statement attributed to Confucianism is “Do not do to others what you would not like done to you.” In other words, when another human being is made a means to someone else's end, rather than being an end in and of herself, the way to oppression and injustice has been paved.

Like elsewhere, women in Muslim societies have been relegated to a status with less autonomy and equality than the status of men. Yet, full equality is part of Qur'anic intent, because only

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18. Although much remains unsaid, I will reserve other points about *zulm* and its categories of usage in order to move toward the conclusion of this discussion regarding women and injustice in Islam.

19. *Laa yu'minu ahadukum hatta, yuhibba li-akhihi, maa yuhibbu li-nafisihi.* (In reference to text: the Prophet said, “One of you does not believe until he loves for his brother (or sister. . . ) what (or as) he loves for himself.” (Translation by author).

through a fully established personhood can any human fulfill his or her obligations before God. In the Qur'an, the purpose for human creation was revealed when God said, "Verily, I am going to create a *khalifah* (caretaker, vicegerent, or trustee) on the earth" (2:38). *Khilafah* (trusteeship) on the planet is the responsibility of each human. In the Qur'anic world-view, fulfillment of this trust constitutes the *raison d'être* of human existence. To deny full personhood to women is to deny them the full capacity of *khilafah* and to thwart the possibility of their fulfilling the basic responsibility decreed by God for all of humankind.

In the historical period following the death of the Prophet, Muslims developed the practical and philosophical details of the Islamic ethos. However, consideration of the full humanity of women, capable of encompassing all manner of change and diversity, was simply not a part of the formula at that time. In addition, as the Islamic civilization developed, the disparity between divine wisdom and human implementation exposed the limitations of humankind in comprehending the divine. Interestingly enough, it was the historical privilege granted to men as official interpreters of divine will that was one of the major factors in limiting our understanding of the divine. God has been reduced to what males have understood. There is not only room for, but a demand for, expanding our comprehension of the divine will by the conscious inclusion of women in radical ways, heretofore unarticulated or perhaps even perceived. To equate human aspiration toward certainty and security with divine intent confines the divine will to human limitation and capacity. The human capacity for reason and imagination is by definition limited, against the divine infinitude. Therefore, as our capacity and perceptions expand, so does our perspective of the nature of God. So the potential for humanity to know with certainty expands and contracts, not on the basis of God, but on the basis of humankind. By accepting women in their place of equality, and by learning from them, through them and about them, new dimensions and potentiality in Islam are expanded and new perceptions of God are understood.

What locked Muslim discourses on issues of women into very narrow constraints was, in part, their inability to articulate and then build upon a hermeneutic which embraced the places for ambiguity in discourse, faith and action as can be perceived by the inclusion of the female voice. Instead, the perception of a female voice in the Qur'an was relegated to the margins, an "othered"

place.<sup>20</sup> One of the results of one-sided interpretation was the establishment of social hegemonies like patriarchy in Muslim societies, since the organization of the social order tends to reflect the positions of privilege for some over “others.” Although social hegemonies have existed for centuries, this—like the single lense of our Qur’anic vision—can be changed in this era. One part of that change would result from replacing the historical silence of the female voice with an integration of that voice into Qur’anic hermeneutics.

Although the female voice exists in the text and, throughout Islamic history, Muslim women create their own voice as they experience the text, both these aspects of the female voice have been marginalized. To move this voice into the center of spiritual and practical consideration promises to unfold multiple layers of meaning. Some of us have experienced these layered meanings in our lives, individually, but they have not been formally constructed, analyzed and consequently standardized as a significant part of mainstream Islamic scholarship and as part of the divine-human exchange. I think closer examination of the female voice will augment, enhance and deepen the beauty of the textual implications as founded by earlier Islamic scholars. Additionally, at places where textual understanding is flat and two dimensional, the female voice could add colors and emphasize a cornucopia of experience and wisdom.

One simple method to get at this dimension, and to begin to recognize shape and form in silences and absences, would be to validate the female experiences, visions, limitations and understandings as part of the vast arena of Qur’anic possibility. This would symbolically castrate the status of privilege that some men have perceived as their divine due by removing the stigma of authority heretofore given exclusively to men. It would instead emphasize a shared privilege in access to divine will and a mutual responsibility in experiencing transformation and in discussing meaning. No doubt, this would also require re-examination of the way in which women have been perceived in society as well as in faith. It would also allow women greater freedom of mobility and self-realization in their Islamic experiences. It is hoped, finally, that Muslim women would be more forthcoming and share the lessons learned from their experiences and the values of their per-

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20. This dimension of Qur’anic exegesis is currently still completely unresearched.

spective within the larger context of global human rights discourse as well as towards greater Islamic understanding.