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REVISITING THE WOMAN QUESTION: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Appraising the Terms of a Quest

An Islamic perspective on the human condition, including the question of women, is necessarily radical - in the literal sense - if only on account of its holism and its transcendence. It is however a perspective which has not been adequately explored at the epistemological and scholarly level and, ironically, it is rarely applied when studying a Muslim context. Instead the latter is frequently subjected to external perspectives which are often reductionist and partial, and are arbitrarily imposed regardless of compatibility or congruence. Meanwhile the benefits that might accrue other equally diverse contexts from a holistic and transcendent perspective are lost on conventional scholarship. Despite an increased context sensitivity within certain strains of contemporary feminist writing, both among westerners and non-westerners, and notably among feminists socialists and post-modernists, this trend hardly affects the way in which women in the Muslim world continue to be perceived and examined, more often as innate objects of inquiry. While the importance of the context in addressing specific aspects of the Woman Question cannot be stressed enough, our focus in this essay is on exploring aspects of the Islamic perspective on a more general level.

Our implicit assumption is that beyond its evident historicity, the Woman Question has a universal dimension to it as well, as the attendant transcultural resonances it evokes well illustrates. Our purpose is to bring to bear an Islamic

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intellectual perspective on this universality and question the Question. In doing so, we hope to gain additional insights on both a timely perspective and a festering issue. Articulating aspects of this perspective exposes some of the inadequacies and limitations of the prevailing paradigm of inquiry in the field of women's studies. It also highlights areas of potential convergence among elements coming from a shaping Islamic perspective, with strains of a critical counter-culture, as it edges its way past the fringes of the academy.

At the outset a number of terms will need to be clarified relating to the Woman Question and to what we mean by an Islamic perspective. The woman question has come to be defined over time in terms of problems arising from the indeterminate and changing status and role of women in society. It has generally been assumed to be a question of ascertaining/ affirming women's rights and liberating women from the yoke of a systemic oppression which keeps them subordinated to the 'tyranny' of men, an oppression made possible by an order of society sanctioning male domination and qualified as 'patriarchal.' In the words of Gayle Rubins, this has rendered the literature on women - both feminist and anti-feminist - "a long rumination on the question of the nature and genesis of women's oppression and social subordination." In this sense, the Woman Question may be presumed to be a modern question in more than one sense. First, it is modern to the extent that rights and freedoms are assumed to be historically recent acquisitions related to a triumphant individualism and to the discovery of the principle of human individuality. As women became aware of themselves as autonomous individuals they too began to nurture expectations and to make corresponding claims upon society. Secondly, it is a modern issue in the sense that it had no place in traditional society by virtue of the very definition of tradition and modernity. In the former, a certain hierarchy and order prevailed where everyone had his or her place and was secure in knowing it. By contrast, the coming of modernity was marked by rupture whereby the norms of a tradition were questioned, and the re-making of the social order was on foot. In this new order nothing was received and nothing transmitted. Everything had to be made out, rationalized, and legitimated on new grounds, and this included the position of women. Thirdly - and related to the latter proposition - the very perception of the Woman Question is a function of modernity which brought with it the realization that things could be different, nothing was 'given' and that whatever existed could be open to challenge and change. In short, modernity brought with it the countenancing of an ever-biology (sex) and society (gender). These are factors which explain why the Woman widening range of possibilities - such as was bound to extend to the realms of Question, as we know it today, is essentially a modern question and that it could not have arisen in the same way in a traditional society.

Conversely, an Islamic perspective might concede to the historicity of the Woman Question, but it would contest that it was essentially a modern question. Woman's status and role in any society is as integral to society itself as life is to humanity. Therefore it pertains to that class of pertinent universal questions which is valid to every age and people, and which must squarely be addressed and resolved. On the other hand, the distinction between tradition and modernity in addressing the Woman Question does not stand up to the test of an

Islamic resolution. What counts in deciding women's position in a given society is not whether it is accepted or contested, but it is the sources for the rationality and legitimacy of this position that are at stake as well as the perceptions of equity which prevail at any given moment. This means that it would be as misleading to identify an Islamic perspective with tradition as it would to question its compatibility with modernity.

Beyond Tradition and Modernity

To put the same idea in a different way one might take a more practical context. Historically, when Islam affirmed the human status of women, assured its systemic regulation, and vested woman accordingly with a legal personality in seventh century Arabian society, it did not do so simply as a rupture with tradition or as a revolution in prevailing mores. Rather, it came to reinforce the positive aspects that might have then existed in what was essentially an anarchical setting, to annul and check its negative impulses, and to reconstruct the matrix for a more viable and moral social entity. In the same vein, when routinization set in, and Islamic precepts became part of a prevailing tradition, the identification with Islam might well have served to legitimate a tradition but it did not, and could not, reduce Islam to that - or any other, particular tradition.

With this in mind, it is possible to see how a tradition might, in time, come to be contested in the very name of the precepts to which it claims allegiance, and how in the course of this confrontation, Islam can become the vehicle for modernity. However, Islam is not to be confused with modernity any more than with tradition. In contesting the status quo and demanding change, both Muslim modernists and neo-normatives - or 'authenticates' - act out of a conviction in the existence of an autonomous order of justice and equity which they see as lacking in the one and unattainable in the other. They seek it in Islam. This provides the context for current attempts at articulating an Islamic perspective in general and for relating it to the Woman Question in particular.

Feminist Affinities: Power and Justice

Articulating an Islamic perspective on the Woman Question starts with postulating a common point of reference which serves at once to relate it to an identifiable core and to distinguish it from prevailing perspectives. If the Woman Question could be attributed to the emergence of a gendered consciousness, as existentialist feminists would maintain, then its affinity with the feminist movement which constitutes its political expression is clear enough. In a general way, the feminist movement can be classified as a movement of social reform. Such a movement usually arises to protest a given order and to reach for an alternative. In its protest it is prompted by a sense of grievance and, in its ambitions, it is inspired by a vision. Given the fact that the grievance is far more tangible than the vision, we might take the feminist movement as militating against a generalized sense of oppression of women in society - an approach which can be related to the Islamic notion of *zulm*, wrong, as opposed to equity

or right. This also sets the stage for the task of a feminist scholarship: As the academic wing of a radical movement it perceives its value exclusively in terms of the contribution it can make to "the political project of ending women's subordination."

An Islamic counterpart would modulate the tone and qualify the intent, without however detracting from the morality or the ethic of an intent or a commitment.

As the under-side of domination, oppression evokes a relational dimension on the one hand and issues of power and justice on the other. A politics of social power thus comes to be ineluctably linked to an ideology of social justice, and the Woman Question becomes the battling and embattled ground for contending visions of the just society. In an Islamic perspective however, just as the Woman Question might be conceived as part of a more general social question of a right and equitable order, justice and power are part of an essentially moral and ontological order which goes beyond politics and ideology. In this way an Islamic critique of prevailing perspectives constitutes a radical critique - again, in the literal sense. It raises fundamental issues of moral agency and accountability, at the same time as it blazes the path for new possibilities. An alternative order and perspective which cohere round a holistic interpretation of the moral and social status of women comes to be seen as a perfectly plausible assumption. With this general outline of the assumptions and rationale for revisiting the Woman Question, we can chart the elements for a critical discourse and pave the way for a new synthesis.

Semantics and Parameters:

Gendered Justice, Engendered Wrongs

In Islam concepts belong to an integrated semantic and conceptual field which stems from the tawhidi belief system and worldview. Given the transcendental axis of the way of knowing, which we shall refer to below as the *tawhidi episteme*, and given its holistic approach to all aspects of life, including temporality itself, it would be specious to attempt to see the "Woman Question" or indeed any other facet of the social question in a fragmenting or merely a horizontal perspective. This would hardly do justice to our understanding of women in Islam. Yet this is frequently the only perspective which is available to the student in the field. It is often found as much in Muslim literature on the subject of both varieties, the apologetic and the defamatory, as in the Western scholarly forays in the relevant departments of anthropological and Middle Eastern area studies.

To show what is meant by the need to define/refine perspectives, one can pause at the origins of the debate on the position of women in society, or, on the Woman Question to ascertain its extent and limits as an ideational/ ideological construct. As suggested above, the feminist movement has its ambivalent origins,

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as both a social reform movement emerging to protest concrete and specific grievances and as a more pervasive ideological protest identifying with issues of human emancipation and gender equality. These latter issues are implicitly taken to be the conditions for redressing an unjust order perpetuated against women and, by the same token, they also prescribe the parameters of both justice and its obverse, oppression. Seen in these terms, the crux of the Woman Question would appear to be an elementary plea for justice. There is a rationale to this plea. The perceived injustices are attributed to the status quo - a prevailing social and cultural order which is often identified with "patriarchy". The latter in turn is conceived of as an institutionalized pattern of male dominance grounded in marriage and reproduced, diffused, and perpetuated through its consecration as the natural order of things and as a legacy sanctified through time immemorial. Feminism however makes little concession to Nature and, far from conceding it any sanctity, it questions the validity of what it sees as a perverted legacy.

Yet, no matter how radical the posture, the issue of gender injustice is rarely addressed in its totality or conceived in an integral context of general "oppression". The idea is rarely entertained that there might exist a pervasive order of reality that is affected by a systemic and diffuse injustice which affects other domains of human existence and social relations as well. What is at stake for conventional and mainstream feminists is a *gendered* oppression, although here too articulating oppression in gendered terms has led to many cul-de-sacs as is amply demonstrated in an evolving scholarship. This merely confirms the fact that issues of oppression or injustice have usually been conceived of in a fragmentary and partial manner. The record of radical movements in modern times shows how defining oppression and fighting for the "liberation of man" from exploitation has taken on a variety of forms, but that it has rarely been seen either in its totality, nor properly attributed to its causality. There was no reason why feminist perceptions on this theme should be exempt from the general constraints which affected other analogous constructs.

Alternative perspectives can yield different interpretations. In a view coming from an Islamic perspective, the problem does not merely lie in misperceptions in locating the status of women in society or in defining and promoting their rights. It lies in the area of a broader *misperception of the nature of oppression and injustice*. Whether the area of inquiry is some general philosophical aspect of the human condition or a particular sociological analysis of some aspect of social organization, the point calls for addressing issues of a fundamental order. This equally subsumes the need of reconsidering prevailing configurations of those structuring and structured relations of human dependency and systemic affinities as they might obtain at any given moment and in any concrete situation. Only then would one be at a decided advantage in tackling the 'woman question' - a question which is only fictively assumed in its generality - or in dealing with any other specific/ festering social issue. Hence, in addressing the question at hand, it must be clear from the outset that the very generality which enables us to abstract constitutes its own constraint. Beyond that, it will be necessary to distinguish the global historical context for addressing this question,

and then to focus on what might constitute a distinctively Islamic mode for its projection.

Historical Contexts and Projections Considered

Given the fact that in the contemporary world, it is the West that calls the piper's tune for the emancipationist creed, a brief examination of the general constraints which attend current dominant feminist rationalizations may be viewed in its context. The West may be culturally defined as heir to a historical legacy born of a fateful convergence between Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. Nor should the consequences of an equally fateful and ongoing encounter with Islam be overlooked. In fact it is the task of scholarship today to redress the oversight and expose the "silence" and repression which have long kept that latter convergence in the dark. In that historical West, we have on record two principal directions in the struggle launched against oppression; one takes its cue from the individual and the other from society. The first is associated with a liberal individualist ethos and is exemplified in the democracies of the free world. The second was until quite recently embodied in the socialist regimes and movements crusading for a just and equitable society founded on equality. In each case, and all cases considered, the prognostics on the roots of oppression and the rationalizations tendered to explain it may have varied in the details but, one point was shared by all. It was a deepening transcendental void that provided the backdrop and the shaping impulse for the social reform movements in the post-Reformation and Enlightened world which was ushered in by a globalizing modernity. This conspicuous absence was disguised, ignored and conflated beneath the persuasiveness of a newly acclaimed authority clad in the din of a positivist rhetoric.

The absence of the transcendental dimension, an absence which has become the hallmark of modernity, had its anaemic consequences for understanding the Woman Question, as indeed for understanding all other questions of an existential nature beyond the immediate social and political order. It diminished the conceptions and definitions of the problems of the age, a distortive diminution which was practically reflected in the banal prescriptions of the "solutions" it proposed. Poverty-stricken and insipid, the projected ideals and blue-prints of the just order tend to give way ultimately to a wasteland of experimental pragmatics and moralities. That became most conspicuous and pernicious in the area affecting the primordial social unit in society, namely the family.

Inherent Constraints and Dominant Matrices

This was not surprising. Both the individualist/liberal and the collectivist/communitarian perceptions which were ideally juxtaposed and counterposed as exclusive and exclusionary alternatives, were of a piece. They were rooted in a benevolent but constrictive and self-constricting secular vision which fed on a diffuse ethic initially associated with the positivist creed of a post-Cartesian era

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and subsequently further compounded by the Comtean and Hegelian conflux. It is of the essence of this philosophy to be reductionist, ego-centric, and materialistic. It is above all a philosophy that is deeply cleft on the ravines of binary perceptions and conflictual leitmotifs. All this has had its indubitable consequences for shaping and texturing the modern feminist discourse in the West. It will take more than the reversals of post-modernity to offset these traits. They are of more than passing significance in any research into the humanities and the social disciplines because they constitute the very traits which have shaped consecutive generations of deluded and delusionary perceptions and which have contributed to a biased and short-sighted scholarship. This observation holds whether the focus is on contemporary women's studies or on any other human and social sector along with its constituent institutions and knowledge matrices in society.

The successive industrial and communications revolutions accelerated the impact of modernity and extended the sway of this philosophy. With its globalization, perspectives prevailing in modern Western scholarship asserted their imperious grip on the mind of generations beyond the historical West. It was not surprising that Muslims as scholars and reformers should have also come to see their own societies and social issues in the mirror of the dominant West. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Woman Question. Obversely it might be contended that even within the Muslim context, the Woman Question cannot be seen independently of the prevailing cultural matrix *in the West*. In this regard, the ambivalent naturalist and humanist biases characteristic of such a matrix remain as uncomplimentary and obstructive to any project that seeks to define/construct human gender, for both men and women, whatever the historical or socio-cultural conditions might be. In redressing prevailing perspectives an alternative is necessary. Conversely, redressing specific perspectives on Women in Islam can hardly be confined to relocating and redefining the subject in the broader context of Islam as a faith, a civilization, a culture and a socio-juristic field, without also confronting the confluences produced in the refractions of an East/West mirror. Globality and modernity further add to the imperatives of addressing the Woman Question in an Islamic perspective. In its generality and specificity the question would seem more plausibly to revert to and converge on a generalized protest and grievance against prevailing norms of sociality, or social organization and interaction, including gender-based social relations. If this is the case, and there is significant support for this view in the literature, then observations coming from an Islamic perspective relating to what constitutes justified grievance - and its dissociation from delusive, anomic, or self-serving grievance-mongering - would be particularly useful in any consideration that aims at comprehension and comprehensiveness. This is simply another way of re-stating a point on relevance made at the outset. It amounts to proclaiming the contemporary ubiquity of the Woman Question and reclaiming the universality and opportuneness of an Islamic perspective.

Relevance and Essence: Invoking an Alternative

In an Islamic perspective rooted in tawhid, it is possible to invoke a Metaphysics of Oppression/Injustice evocative of the obscurity, the darkness, and the straying associated with the yoke of ignorance. This provides a meaningful matrix embedding the ethical and formal prescriptions and proscriptions associated with Islam as an encompassing belief-system. We could attempt to convey something of this metaphysics by briefly dwelling on the synoptic and graphic concept of *zulm* (wronging/self-wronging, oppression, injustice, unfairness, evil). The etymology, semantics, and usage of this term in a Qur'anic lexicon connotes a state of cosmic dysfunction or a seminal 'darkness upon darkness'. Qur'anic language has its own resonance and associations which re-create or generate their psychic effect in the human heart as a means of conveying meaning and inducing response. Such is a universe of discourse where the negative associations of oppressive conduct or a prevailing human condition might be depicted metaphorically as stemming from the pit of the blackest of nights in the womb of the earth beneath the fathomless seas, or in the expanse of the heavens shorn of their glittering embellishments. In either case we are left with the *zulumat* ('darknesses'). This is the obverse of Huda or Hidayah ie. the divine guidance and the translucency or the bright of day and radiance of enlightenment which goes with it. The worst that can befall anyone, from the perspective of divine guidance as much as from that of human perplexity/pathos, is to be left groping in the dark: for then there can be no measure of distinguishing the one from the other, of telling darkness from light. The whole purpose of such luminosity and incandescence that infuse the Clarification (*alBayan*= another name of the revealed guidance inscribed in Scripture) is to secure humanity against its own excesses and deviations which constitute the essence of *Zulm*. In the absence of divine guidance, or oblivious to it, human beings are more than likely to fall prey to their own whims and they remain at the mercy of their misinformed and perverted inclinations ultimately suffering the consequences of illusions of power and fancies which they mistake for "interests". The concept of *zulm* is a rich and flexible one as it includes the idea that injustice is not just a category which applies to inter-human relations, but that it also applies to abuse of oneself, willful and knowing or otherwise. This is the category of *zulm al-nafs* (self-wronging), a category which pre-eminently invokes a human moral responsibility of the first order.

From the doctrinal standpoint, the greatest injustice that one can do to oneself is to deny God, or more pointedly to associate others/another with God. (This is *shirk* which constitutes the cardinal offense in Islam). It should not be difficult to see why in the religion of pure tawhid, this should constitute the greatest offense and should be classified in a category of wronging oneself. If God the Creator is the Light and the source of human guidance, then clearly any denial or obfuscation of the idea of God constitutes a sealing off of the source of our perceptions on self, life and other, and a pollution at that very source. From this point the shrouding associated with *zulumat* sets in, and confusion resulting in disorder, moral chaos, can only follow. In this sense the two original dimensions of *zulm* conjoin: *zulm* as darkness associated with an ignorance of truth, and *zulm* as injustice, associated with the inversion of an order of right, of measure

and proportion such as is implicit in *`adl*. This is the significance of a doctrinal purity in Islam: the assertion of monotheism unadulterated. For it is conceded that insan, generic man (which includes woman) is capable of error and forgetfulness, but as long as the access to the source of Truth remains, then the possibility of recovery, rediscovery, and the re-alignment one's perceptions and actions to the Truth is maintained. The emphasis in the Woman Question as it has been conceived in modernity (in both its original Marxist and its subsequent individualist formulations) has been on the injustice inflicted upon women by others, men, society, convention or whatever. Rarely has it been thought that in taking the laws and mores in their hands and legislating for themselves in the light of a world reconstructed along the lines of a much vaunted but steadily blurring feminist consciousness, women might instead quite unwittingly be contributing to their own afflictions. Yet, essentially this may be only the gendered variant of a generalized human propensity for mis-appropriating authority and competences and ending up assuming the

burdens of a morality that is beyond them. Conceptually, in admitting *zulm al nafs* as a category of analysis this self-infliction becomes a possibility - much to the benefit and promise of engaging a reflexive self-critique.

In this view then, the assessment of "Women's Liberation" could on the face of it, qualify as a movement to remove perceived injustices befalling women in society. In fact *its consequences entail much that could qualify as an infliction of an even greater grievance by women upon themselves*. This brings us back to the general idea that *zulm* is predicated on its obverse: guidance. In the absence of the latter, human relationships and the human condition in which they are embedded become an open field of experimentation. While doubtless there is an element of "adventure" and "risk-taking" or enterprise in the human venture in this life-world, which includes the necessity of trial and error and of learning by mistake, yet this human venture is neither as random nor is it as "purpose free" as some would like to think. Moreover, trial and error which are integral to human life, can only be a piece-meal process. As such, it is only reasonable that it should be applied to aspects of life and not to its very basis. Morality is predicated on knowledge and when the kind of knowledge which touches on the fundamentals of human life and the social order becomes an object of speculation, then the moral foundations of life become truly precarious.

What has happened in our modern civilized world which has made dramatic technological advances in a span that is best measured by decades rather than centuries, is that the knowledge of our own human interests and of the kind of moral order best suited to our increasingly global societies has, in fact, "regressed". As a contemporary humanist puts it, the scale of modern technology is steadily closing the salutary gap between everyday and ultimate issues, between occasions for common prudence and occasions for illuminated wisdom and confronting us with a pathetic paradox where we need wisdom most when we believe in it least, and such that philosophy that is rational man's ultimate recourse and medium to enlightenment, finds itself unprepared for the challenge. Nor is there much hope in tradition shoring up the dwindling human reserves with the loss of its societal "existential anchors". It is this disproportion

between our material achievements and the uncertainties in our moral order which makes contemporary civilization a costly and unpredictable human venture in terms of its effective and potential consequences for human spiritual and moral fulfillment. It is this gap which continues to inspire the effervescence in moral theory as the work of contemporary writers, many of whom are critics of modernity, indicates.

Women and gender related issues occupy pride of place in the dilemmas of a modern culture. In this sense indeed, the Woman Question appears to constitute the intersecting point for the human and social predicaments which have come to define this culture. This is as true today at the turn of the millenium as it was almost fifty years ago when The Modern Woman was credited for an impending civilizational malaise. Seen in terms of a North/South axis, the culture of the North has frequently been defined in terms of its technological breakthroughs and material prosperity as variations on the post-industrial, welfare-society model. Only recently has a sub-culture of moral vacuity and social morbidity come to be identified with them. Such imperfections notwithstanding, this northern tier becomes the standard for evaluating globality - a much prized nexus of modernizing aspirations and achievements. Yet, this very nexus exposes the discrepancy between a material and technological progress on the one hand, and a moral bankruptcy on the other, so that a general human/social disorientation becomes most conspicuous. The failure of social theory in whatever tradition it was conceived at the outset of the century is testimony to this lag. Here we may squarely interpose the Woman Question - not only for its own claims to globality, but for the light it throws on this disjuncture.

Nodality and the Maternal Metaphor

This prominence, or nodality, is not surprising if we consider the centrality of women to life itself. To do so, one would admittedly have to accept Woman in her unique and most elevated role in relation to life; (the woman we have in mind here is the woman of everyday life, the ordinary soul-flesh-and-blood person, not the title to an abstraction) - and then it would be in her role as "mother" and in the understanding of maternity as the cradle and fountainhead of all life bridging any presumed divide between nature and culture/nurture. That this generic role is a symbiosis of the essence of both nature and nurture or nature and culture is the most elementary one associated with motherhood is grasped from the semantics of the Arabic term: *u-m-m*. The etymology points to the "source and wellspring", in this case of life. It is not surprising that the term "ummah" the arabic for "community" should have its affinities with "umm", given the realization that the life-world is intrinsically a "social" phenomenon and that the agents destined for its habitation are distinctly such. This too is something we learn from the linguistics as well as from the metaphysics of human nature: the stuff of which the "mother" and the social group are made being one and the same. It is namely that stuff of "*insan*", (generic man) that earthy human creature, whose denotation has its supplementary literal connotations of an all out "company seeking creature". With woman comes a

special kind of companion seeking that preserves the life generating impulse in humanity and cradles the values and the medium which assure it its renewal as well as its potential qualities for good or for ill. This is also the meaning identified with mother as the source of life and with mothering as a role which lies at the heart of the process of engendering community - a theme and concept inspired by a tawhidi perspective and which is relegated to a separate inquiry.

The Moral Order and Human Agency: Woman's Role

The main point about human life and social life is that it is neither simply a *natural* order of creation nor one of a *conventional* process of evolution: At the heart of the natural and the conventional orders there is a moral order. In the case of human beings this order is predicated on the condition for human agency ie. on the freedom of choice. This presupposes the ability to choose to be one way rather than another, and to act in one sense rather than another etc. `Sense' itself assumes that there is an essential and ultimate value to life and to action such as to assure meaning and purpose to human life and action. Whatever conforms to such meaning and purpose is potentially moral. It is the weighting of a related system of scales and measures that calls forth a corresponding system of values in society and this becomes the vital yardstick for evaluating human life and action. The existing of such a system and the operation of such a mechanism supposes in turn a capacity for knowledge and for a discernment of what constitutes life, meaning and purpose, requisites which have their presuppositions. Once morality is admitted and the idea and the understanding of the moral order is acknowledged, an imperative and an ability to distinguish between right and wrong follows. The knowledge of the moral domain is grounded in a belief system. To know what is right one must have an idea of what is true. The belief system in its turn can either be grounded in faith and trust or in speculation and doubt. In the latter case we speak of cynicism as the end point of a range of attitudes which among other states of consciousness, spans those of uncertainty and indifference. In the former case of a knowledge grounded in faith and trust we speak of hope and belief.

Beyond the knowledge of the moral order, there remains the commitment to its realization ie. to living it or to bringing it about. This presupposes a will to act and to organize so as to bid the good and to forbid the evil and to elucidate and to lay the ground-work for a healthy order. It is precisely this task which constitutes and defines the essence of the "moral cause" round which all "believers" men and women of good faith and goodwill rally to fight a particular manifestation of oppression and to alleviate its consequences and strive to remove its causes. At the same time they will work to lay the foundations of the moral order as they perceive it to be depending on the sources of their perceptions and their focus. In the case of Muslims, believers men and women mentioned in the Quran, they will seek the parameters of that order such as it has been revealed to them by God through his Prophets and such as it has been inscribed in the Guidance and the Remembrance.

This is the perspective which constitutes the background to the tawhidic episteme and against which the "Woman Question" in general and that of

women in Islam in particular should be raised. In this perspective, the burden of morality and the responsibility laid on human agency for the moral order is a shared burden among all the human race, irrespective of its created and intended diversity. According to this perception, women no less than men bear their burden of responsibility in as much as they share in the human agency which qualifies them for this charge. In this day and age when one takes for granted woman's "humanity" one can hardly comprehend the mind of an age when hairsplitting and defamatory heart-rending arguments took place in order to determine woman's nature and to verify whether she might not be of a subhuman species. Yet, one cannot be too complacent about the state of mankind's moral evolution. Such fundamental questions have little to do with man's presumed rationality, or with the level of intellectual apprehension attributed to an age or to a people. Throughout history down to our own times, the issue has continued to be one of ascertaining the status as much as the humanity of woman even if the parties to the debate have changed and even if the parameters of the discourse have extended to include debating the humanity of both men and women. It would do well therefore to realize that these are among the answers that retain a perennial relevance in the Qur'an. The fact that not only is woman's human status unequivocally settled there, but that her role as an active autonomous and accountable agent in the human common weal is unequivocally maintained can only be appreciated against this background of mortal vacillation.

Bonding and Solidarity: A Communal Ethos

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The moral imperative provides the context for apprehending the tawhidi ethos of bonding and solidarity in the community. It might be addressed in the idiom of traditional Islamic scholarship as *fiqh al wilayah* ie. as the discourse on social allegiance and on the discharging of joint responsibility. It is this principle which undergirds and safeguards the association of the members of a community, whatever the nature and allegiances of that community might be. The community here is an inclusive category, which is distinctly seen in terms of both genders as well as in terms of social roles. In the case of a community of faith and common purpose believers, men and women, are explicitly reminded of their intrinsic affinities. (9:71; 3:195) This invokes in each and all a mutual and shared responsibility for one another and for a compassionate posture of mutuality of oneness of the other best expressed in the Quranic idioms of *marhama* (mutual compassion and mercy) and *ba`dhukum min ba`dh* ('intra-connectedness' or, being one of the other). This compassionate innateness invites the one and the other in a stance of joint supportiveness and mutuality, each to fend for the other and with the other, in upholding the good, the moral and the just, and in warding off the evil, the immoral, and the oppressive. The compassion and the righteousness is as much part of the ethos and orientation which comes with the Guidance to believers to promote the moral well-being of society.

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The above observation about the Quranic form of addressing gender might be further qualified to accentuate its tenor. When the aggregate or the individuals within the group are being addressed in a general context that emphasizes moral agency and accountability there is more than the cohesion of the group that is at stake. What is at stake there in determining foundational relationships between men and women, as well as between sectors of the group, is the principle of joint responsibility and mutual solidarity: such that in a community, whether it is perverted or righteously oriented in its actions, it is always this principle of bonding and mutuality which embraces and supersedes any more specific gender-role differentiation. (45:19; 9:67; 8:72,73) Nor should it be overlooked that there is ultimately an organic basis for this bonding in the community, the bonding of kith and kin, which should be understood in its concrete extended family connotations, as well as in the more general anthropological conception of the affinity and unity of the Adamite progeny. (33:6; 8:75; and 49:13; 4:1) The emphasis throughout in the tawhidi ethic of community however 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 isolates; 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 more 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 the need and situation arise, they, women, as much as 'men' are part of a whole. This is as much of an ontological precept as an ideological standpoint in the tawhidi episteme: where duality and plurality are part of the order of creation, and 'individuality', or absolute oneness and uniqueness, belongs to God alone.

'Say: God is One, Only God is the steadfast and the ever-sought,

He begets not, nor is He begotten; And naught/none is to be compared unto Him.'

The equal stature in human agency for both men and women thus ascertained, and the principle of shared care and responsibility between and among them unequivocally established, the parameters are duly laid out for addressing the "Woman Question" in society at large at a given moment of history. With the rule established in its universality, every consequent moment of particularity can only partake of the whole. In no way must the particular contravene a universal in a cosmic order that defers to a principled hierarchy. In this hierarchy the elementary rules set the parameters of the game and these rules are elementary because they pertain to the elements of any social order. Within these parameters, the equality of human stature is a God-given grade/quality and prerogative which neither men nor women owe to one another nor to any segment in humanity. It is not an achievement on the part of the privileged few who manage to procure it and who can thus "earn" their position by virtue of their efforts, or by whatever merits they might claim. Rather, it is a status that

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needs to be protected against any infringement in the name of perserving and maintaining a God-given/ordained bounty and "degree" of honor which is invested in humanity. This constitutes the practical consequence of a belief in transcendence, and assures the social and historical implications of tawhid in a worldly context.

Let us briefly recap on the meaning of tawhid and spell out the essentials of its implications for our concerns. Its threshold and nexus is the shahadah: *la-ilaha illa allah muhammadun rasul allah!* At the same moment that the article of faith divests divinity of all things created and consecrates it exclusively to the One God, the Almighty and Beneficent Sovereign, the Creator, Sustainer and ultimate Arbiter and Arbitrator of all things, it engages the conscience of a responsible individuality and sets the bounds for legitimacy in society. For those women contesting within this framework an oppressive order, the question would hardly be one of a redistribution of power or of renegotiating the terms of justice in foundational terms. Rather, they would be contesting an abuse in an order of delegation, and pressing for the implementation and re-instatement of a common order of equity which was binding on all. The "emancipation" sought would be from manipulative egocentric interests and from the weight of an inertia that clogged and obscured the practices and perceptions within society at any given moment.

"Equality," too, as a cultural and social norm finds its roots in a matrix of absolute values that both ground and transcend the social and the cultural. As such it exacts its demands on the individual and society alike in a manner that can not be adequately translated in the terms of a world of moral relativism.

Owed neither to men nor women, this essential and constituent equality in worth becomes a sacred duty to preserve and a common responsibility to honor by all. Created beings of the self-same stuff, beholden in their very privileges, in their createdness and their sustenance, Men and Women bonded in community come to see themselves in this register as equally involved in the prescribed social order and, consequently, jointly responsible for its inequities. Any transgression against this pre-ordained equality of human stature becomes more than an act of oppression perpetuated by one segment of humanity against another: it constitutes a mortal self-infliction and infringement that activates the bane of *zulm alnafis*. Further compounded by dimensions of the sacrilege, any such violation impinges on the "bounds" set on life and the dignity of life by God, and as such the transgression is compounded. These are the bounds referred to in Islamic jurisprudence as *hudud allah* - a concept that is juridically incorporated from the Quran. In this sense then, gender is not so much an irrelevant factor in determining the patterns of group association and personal commitment, as it is one relevant variable among others in ascertaining the measure of adherence to the proclaimed *hudud* as parameters and the frontiers that assure the social order its contingent threshold of morality. The sociology and psychology of the just order is embedded in a metaphysics of a moral transcendence. A Muslim feminism, to the extent that it stops short of being an oxymoron, can only find its validation in these grounds.

The Feminist Non-Question?

In an Islamic perspective on justice and moral agency there may be every justification for a 'righteous anger' and for its sequel, in the activism on the part of particular women. Such anger and activism need not, however, be exclusively interpreted, regurgitated, and 'enghettoed'. It is a qualified endorsement that questions the rampant modern day "feminism" when this entails the mobilization of one sector of humanity against the other, females against males. Such rallying strategies are all the more dubious in view of both the underlying conflictual ethos informing the feminist movement and the growing confusion about the ends it has in view. A revisited perspectives would take in its stride the politics of contesting wrongs that is just as much at fault as the misperceived conceptions in which it is embedded. Rather, there is a collective stance among all believers, men and women, in a given social situation, to remove the stigma of oppression, repression, or committed excesses (*tughian*) once the moral order has been tainted through denying or neglecting the divinely ordained matrix of equity/reciprocity. This becomes a cause which takes off from the individual/personal conscience of each member of the now diminished because violated community and reaches out to trigger off a disenfranchised and offended social ethic. The instance of treating women condescendingly as the underling and the weaker half that is the buffeted underdog of any given society, or whatever the instances of abuse might be, become an affront to the moral conscience in that very society and cannot simply be relegated to a gendered contingent to deprecate it. To the extent that Islam has contributed to shaping the social/cultural consciousness in Muslim societies, or in the Islamicate, this kind of solidarity or communal sociability has been, and remains potentially pervasive - even where the issue at stake is not articulated in conspicuously *religious* terms or even consciously experienced as such.

It is only this awareness in relocating the "Woman Question" at the crux of the societal/collective Muslim conscience which can account for what might otherwise be seen as an anomaly. Namely, the role assumed by male reformers in general and reform-minded religious scholars in particular in leading the movement for defending "Women's Rights" in modern Muslim societies - a 'courtesy' which most Muslim feminists duly acknowledge. This is hardly to be wondered at in a society where the majority of its members are spared the traumas of an existential Angst. Islam as faith and doctrine (*aqida*) has fostered this moral conscience by affirming women's place in the complex web of gender relations. In the kith and kin network where blood and other cognate relationships are secured in a base of equity and reciprocity, the spiritual and material needs, as well as the personal and the social needs of woman as an integral person are met.

In sum, the precept that "women are the twin-mates of men" encapsulates the gist of an ethic of gender relations where the cognitive, the affective, and the symbolic dimensions are met to the advantage of a variety of complementary kinship roles that are rendered meaningful and value-laden in its light. Beyond the Prophet's dictum regarding the integrality of the gender bond, we thus see the personal and social ties in the family setting and in its attendant roles:

starting with the "mother", "wife", "daughter", "sister", "aunt", and "cousin" up and down and across the lines of descent or ascent and inheritance. Such as in the account that comes through the eyes of a perceptive author, a Muslim woman's world can never be a dull, lonely, depopulated, or alienated world but, we may add, that it ideally radiates warmth and beneath the vibrant clutter, it retains an impregnable structure. In fact, if we wished to track down the links which structure an extensive and inclusive spectrum of allegiances and affinities, we could find a most reliable guide to that in the mandatory shari`ah injunctions prescribing the distribution of the property of the deceased among his/her heirs.

Observing the Boundaries: Transgression and Oppression

To go back to the basic concept of "zulm" which is at the root of all oppression, injustice and immorality, *transgressing on the rights of kinship is an injustice* which is doubly perpetuated: it is a transgression against the "natural" order of social relations ie. against "convention" and it is a transgression against oneself and one's own. In both cases, the rights upheld against each other by the members of the kinship group, as well as the obligations owed to one another have their origins in a God ordained order of justice. This order includes limits and bounds for interaction as well as rules to be observed. Rules of mutuality reciprocity which transcends the constituent units and their members to the Creator and the Supreme Legislator. It is in this sense that the moral code in the tawhidi episteme is part of an immutable order of justice and truth and is not a historical contingency. How the web of human relationships may be ordered and evaluated at any given moment, or the form social organization assumes, may vary; but the principle of essential and mandatory duties and rights owed to others, varying in degree of proximity and expectation, remains in effect and becomes, moreover, a precept for an inclusive solidarity within the community at large. Again here we could take our cue from the specific Quranic injunctions on *infaq*, which institute an ethics of spending of one's possessions and wealth in the way of good and God. This occurs through a mandatory context (*zakat*) as well as through the wide-ranging voluntary framework of charity (*sadaqa*) enjoined on those who believe and do good to invest in the way of the Beautiful Loan in this world which Allah will repay many times over on the Day of ultimate Recompense.

Historically, wherever this ethic was observed, it has had far-reaching implications for women's status and role in society, whether this is assessed against an individualist yardstick of autonomy and choice, or whether it is viewed from the standpoint of the collectivity. Reinforcing an ecology of moral compassion, as we shall see below, comes an ethic of practical responsibilities which assures an order in which woman is a prime beneficiary, as well as a potential benefactress. Our emphasis here however is on the parameters of an inclusive and extensive network of relations within which women are located, rather than on the qualities of an equitable order.

In taking our cue from the scope of *infaq*, we need to remember that this community begins with *al-aqrabun*, those closest to oneself, and extends progressively to include various degrees of neighbors distinctively identified in ever-widening circles/variants of *al-jar*, in what comes to assume a seamless communal and intercommunal web of human solidarity rather than a particularly spatial projection. In this bonding of mutuality and responsibility, there is enough human space to secure the wayfarer, *ibn al sabil*, against the hazards of a physical space so as to assure for all a compassionate ecology: anchored in a complex but integrated 'communology.' The Muslim community to which binding moral dues, or "duties" are owed starts off from an immediate nucleus of cognate, or a concrete and knowable locus of kith and kin, or blood relatives and affines, and it extends to include practically everyone a person is likely to come into contact with in the course of his sedentary (or mobile) life-cycle. Therein lies the essence of an Islamic urbanism: or the premise of the "civic culture" in the "Muslim City". The spatial layout is a function of the community, not the reverse, and the institutions which develop in that urban conglomeration are as much a function of communal solidarity as their premise.

In the above, we have seen how the "Woman Question" may be intrinsically re-interpreted and relocated, in so far as it addresses women as a subject of human agency and accountability in the divine economy of mortal relations. This is the locus of the immutability of women's personhood and identity with its bearing on the issue of women's basic status in any society. We have also referred to the principle of group solidarity and bonding in the community where gender differentiation is a source for mobilizing the group to greater cohesion and mutuality rendering it more competent for its 'civilizational mandate'. One does not have to go back to the 'great chain of being' to arrive at the premise of human-bondedness and to rediscover the principle of (male-female) pairing that inheres in creation. It would seem that once the principle of women's intrinsic status as an individual/ moral being on a par with every other - and accordingly worthy of dignity, freedom, challenge and responsibility - has been embedded in the moral conscience, the soundness of the grounds of social organization at the level of the group in a given historical setting follows. Furthermore, if gender is taken as a point of demarcating groups in any situation, then it is clear that women and men are collectively bonded agents and that any attempt to split society on the basis of gender ie. to institutionalize gender in a group allegiance spelling reductionism and exclusivism is ruled out. Beyond these general parameters regulating the moral conscience at an individual and group level, the specific allocation of social roles in any historical situation becomes broadly a matter of convention ie there is a wide latitude of flexibility in assigning active roles in the human and social agency at stake in fending the moral order to which the community with all its members, men and women, are bound.

Institutional Parameters: The Family

Beyond the generalities designating the "Woman Question" , one could turn to the more concrete social question in a given society by briefly addressing the fundamental unit there, ie. the "family". Here again defining the family unit in any given situation might be a matter of convention and contingent on the

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prevailing socio-historical conditions much like any other social institution. Yet, because of its core function to any society - modern, traditional, industrial or underdeveloped - the family unlike other mutable or transient institutions retains a special position. It calls for definite stipulations and definitive orientations. Here clearly the gender factor is at the root of the family institution for it is in the pairing of creation and in the dual sex society that the reproductive faculties of the human species are secured. And because unlike reproduction in the rest of creation, human reproduction has its special prerequisite and conditions, the guidance afforded to humanity in this sphere falls within the range of assuring this field its anchors in the "moral" rather than the "natural" order. Beyond fluctuating human tastes and desires, or matters of opinion and expedience, "instinct" and "convention", from an Islamic perspective, there is the need and necessity for set of guidelines to be observed, if the well-being of individuals, members of the aggregate is to be secured and if the morality of the founding social unit is to be such as to warrant it a pivotal role in promoting the general moral order.

This is the perspective for understanding the various detailed stipulations regulating the diverse aspects of a gender-based relationship between men and women, and of seeing their relevance to the soundness of the whole. Above all, it explains why this specific domain of human interrelations was singled out for relatively extensive and precise divine instruction. Taking our cue from the overall position on human agency and human accountability, and from the principle of bonding and allegiance in the community, we may go a step further and suggest that in an Islamic perspective, the burden of responsibility for the welfare of the family assumes a more stringent apportionment among the men and women involved in that intimate relationship. In this sense, we are no longer looking at the human and communal domain of this relationship, but we are looking at the web of "domestic" relationships in a context of specific and designated roles and functions or mutual responsibilities in this web of intimacy women becomes mother, wife, daughter, sister, aunt she is no longer simply conceived in her "innate individuality" an isolate in a complex network of relationships. The same applies to men where they are not conceived in the apportionment of duties and responsibilities and in the relegation of rights and prerogatives as individually privileged status-bearers, but rather as willful or duty-bound ethical agents ascribed to certain roles in a joint enterprise which is at the roots of the stability and well being in the community.

The constituent act instituting this "web of domesticity" in society is the marriage contract which is inspired more by a culture of piety than legality. "What is probably most characteristic of the Islamic position is that marriage ... is regarded first and foremost as an act of piety. Sexual control may be a moral triumph, reproduction a social necessity or service, and sound health a gratifying state of mind. Yet, these values take on a special meaning and are reinforced if they are intertwined with the idea of Allah, conceived of as religious commitments, and internalized as divine blessings." It is the idea of contract which institutionalizes the principle of reciprocity, mutuality and equity in this relationship between the sexes on the eve of their foundational act which is the entry into the multi-faceted bond that lays the grounds for the nucleus of society.

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Here we think in terms of a variety of roles and assignments which are all centered on the idea of contract - an idea which Islamically perceived has little affinity with its counterpart in the liberal utilitarian tradition. These include the ideals of personhood, consent, founding, maintenance, duration, dissolution, continuity, leadership, direction, guardianship, etc. While both parties to the contract are responsible for the institution to which this contract gives rise ie. for the well being and soundness of the relationships which ensue; yet the roles within this partnership are essentially assumed within a framework of "complementarity" not "identity". The role of one partner takes off where that of the other ends, or so it would seem, and the sequence and flow of roles and interdependencies in a close knit bonded relationship such as is instituted by the marriage contract can only be understood and assessed in this context of interconnectedness. This too is the context and background which renders the concept of a contract in marriage more than a mechanical and legal construct structuring mutual obligations and privileges between disparate individuals as charged by the feminist and communitarian critics in current political theory. Only an anthropology / sociology that is paradigmatically congenial to a holistic cognition can provide an adequate framework for addressing the gender-related dimension.

At the same time, marriage is a relationship which is founded on the idea of stability, or duration and continuity, as well as equity. This confronts us with the temporal dimension. As of all temporality one is involved in the process of evolution or growth and this supposes "sequence" and "phases" or the idea of life-cycles. Of the essence of temporality too, is the idea of dissolution and that of renewal or reproduction and regeneration. Hence, the "contract" instituting this cycle of the primal social unit must be conceived with provisions which encounter the various options embedded in the temporal human condition. To note, the many sided aspects of a complex human/social institution have been provided for in principle through the comprehensive scope of the precepts of the Shari`ah, (as distinct from fiqh); since the inception of the first ummatic community in the Madina polity and across a flux of generations in the Muslim Orient and Occident, this consensually sanctified Code has provided the blueprint for many of the socio-legal developments there, both in a positive and negative sense. In this sense, God's Guidance to men and women in this lifeworld in the here-and-now, - that shorthand for temporality - goes beyond utopia to history. It is aimed at providing them with the essentials which assure them against the rigors of a journey where, in a tawhidic episteme that underlies and unites an Abrahamic worldview, the life-world is but the passage to immortality and the testing ground of man/insan's mettle and morality. This points us to a critical, if implicit, category in the Islamic perception of a compassionate ecology that qualifies the health of the community.

"AIDS": Inversing a Syndrome?

The conditions for maintaining or activating the human auto-immune defense system (AIDS) which underlies the moral order, in this fateful contest may be defined along two axes: one of "interiority" and the other of "exteriority". The former defines man/insan in terms of his relationship with his Creator as

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"devotee" vis-a-vis the object of his devotion and spiritual servitude, while the latter defines woman/insan in terms of her relationship to others. Within society, the "family" lies at this intersection between both realms and becomes a microcosm of the social world as it prepares its members as agents of the social order for their divinely assigned mandate and agency in their passage to eternity. It is the first testing ground and lasting arena for the production and reproduction, the generation and regeneration of generations upon generations of devotees and mor(t)al agents. Conversely put the axis of "interiority" is predicated on human consciousness of a relationship with a Creator and Sustainer and on an ultimate Return. This is seen by the Muslim/ Muslima as the primordial and enduring bond which transcends the confines of temporality. It is a relationship which is as intrinsic and as basic to human life as only a reformed idea of a primordial and immutable human nature could be.

As we touch on interiority, and evoke a condition of distorted alteriority, we are also tempted to shift gears and move our discourse to another plane. Instead of a reified or abstracted discourse about the woman question and the Islamic perspective, we may assume the role of narrator and leave *her* to lead the foray from `within'. `She' ofcourse is the Muslim scholar turned participant in a stream of reflexive self-consciousness. One of the merits of a `re-modulated' feminist discourse is its liberating potential and a nuanced subjectivity is one of its privileged accesses. Subjectivity here is not only a rediscovered dimension of human integrality; more than necessity turned to virtue, it can contribute to the recovery and reappropriation of a method for enlightenment as it pushes out the frontiers for human/cosmic inter-connectedness as well as for a more holistic self-understanding. In this mood we proceed to recap on a synthesis.

A `piety-minded' Muslim woman (who in a reconstituted tawhidi episteme is by no means antithetical to her shari`ah-minded sister) will thus rethink her world past the "woman question" from the perspective of a re-discovered tawhidic sensibility. In such an episteme she will see that generic humanity resides in that relationship of devotion to God. This is the "`ubdiyyah" which connotes her acknowledgment of her createdness as a moral being (insan) and accordingly her indebtedness in gratitude and unalloyed allegiance to her Creator. Since the origin of her creation, the ultimate destination on her return, and the course of her after-life are all matters of the unseen *ghayb*, they are beyond the bounds of her immediate life-world experience. She will concede in good faith and not without reason, that one can only learn about these extra-mundane and extemporaneous experiences from the knowledge revealed through prophets before whom God has removed the veil of the Unseen. By informing his Messengers explicitly of the essentials that the human needs to know in that domain, God has freed mortals from the grips of anxiety, spared them the vanity of empty speculation, and given them an opportunity to live the here-and-now in the knowledge of these certitudes. So, in the tawhidi episteme in so far as the relationship goes between herself as devotee and her Creator as Lord and Provider, guidance constitutes the `conveyor belt' and the vital cord that seals the devotional bond. This she takes as the essential covenant and pledge that sets the stage for the life-world. Simultaneously, it assures that the proper distance is always maintained between the divine *uluhiyah* and the mortal

(bashariyya/insaniyya). The integrity of the one and the other is predicated on this distance which beyond the existential level must be assured and secured at the conceptual/cognitive level as well. She comes to understand the rigor of the provision against *shirk*: ie. against pantheism, or any form of association in some aspect of divinity or overlordship with God. She will point out the pertinence of such a caution in an age where matters have gone beyond sheer association to plain self-apotheosization in divinity. Where the Guidance is the vital connection between mortal insan and Allah, she remonstrates, it is at the same time both a token of the compassion and the merciful justice which is ingrained in creation and a testament to the existential plight of created man. In this way, the guidance which serves to inform of the "unseen" in so far as it affects our attitudes and perceptions and our conduct in our life world, also serves to lay the basis of our "religious devotions" - in the strict sense of the term - and to further show us how we are expected to lead our lives in the more general sense as only the 'homo-religioso' in the *fitric insan* should.

Guidance and Concentricity

Creation and the here-and-now in the life-world may be seen to lie within the parameters of the divine economy as essentially good and serving a purpose, she concedes. It follows that the prescriptions for morality are also designed as part of the guidance given humans in this world. The closer the area of this moral order to the generic human condition the more detailed are its provisions. The general conception of the "generic" she reasons, must surely lie in its independence of "temporality" which, by definition, can only spell a condition of mutability and change. The wonder of the God-given code of guidance then, must lie in its ability to balance between the "permanent" in the human condition and the ever-changing. The flexibility of the moral code in Islam she concludes, is the logical function of this enduring and just balance which can only ensue from the wisdom of an All-Knowing, All-Encompassing divine Providence. Other inferences follow.

Just as the rituals of the devotions instituted by God for insan to observe as devotee in his relationship to his Lord are independent of place and time; so, too, the principal stipulations organizing the domestic relationship in the family enjoy a similar autonomy. They are applicable to the man/woman condition and to the family regardless of the form or the stage of development of a given society and regardless of the proclivities or a certain race or people. In this way, a comprehensive and detailed moral code is provided to secure inter-human relationships at the foundational level of society: ie. the family. At the same time it provides for the generalities of a moral code that addresses the human organization at its most extended and inclusive level. The principles organizing the latter are only maintained at an unambiguous generality and the details are left to the temporal setting or the stage of development of the particular society in question. This is unlike the regulations in the sphere of domesticity, ie. in the family or the household, which sphere provides the enduring nucleus for every conceivable human society whatever the level of sophistication or level of prosperity.

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She will point out that it is important to keep in mind the contrast between the generality of the stipulations of the Quran on the "Ummah", which constitutes the global political community regardless of its level, scope or formal organization, and the detailed provisions on the family as the core institution of any society. It is this balance between the general and the specific and the clarity in demarcating the spheres of 'juristic competence' which assures the universality and the continued and renewed relevance of the socio-ethical code in Islam. However, she also recalls that while there might be a distinction between the possible spheres of human /collective organization and though the contrast between the categories of address may differ from the more specific to the more general, there remains a fundamental unity in the socio-ethical matrix which makes the family and the political community in the tawhidic global order both of a piece. In that cosmone, or communology there is no dichotomy or conceivable antinomy between the "private" and the "public" any more than there might be a discontinuity between society and polity. Justice, equity, reciprocity, as much as caring and sharing are all of the ethics of purposeful human aggregation, whatever its plane of organization. The rules for ordering the primal unit in the collectivity or the group, (the *jama`ah*) are the same rules which sanction the ultimate unit of faith and allegiance and human solidarity.

One has only to remember, she observes, that in the Qur'an, consultation, deliberation and arriving at joint decisions (*shura*) also converge with the the injunctions on mutuality, reciprocity, care, and consent, specifically in a man-wife and family related context. (2:233) The ethics of practical conduct in concrete life-situations too, such as may be found in the living traditions of the Prophet as social (and spiritual) leader and role model, reinforce these injunctions. "The best among you, the worthiest and most noble, are those who are the best, the kindest and most considerate to their folk" (*khairukum khairukum li ahlihi*) is an exhortation that is as valid today as it was to a seventh century Arabia on the brink of its transition then to an egoistic materialism. The pathos of modernity may be seen to lie in a bare and simple truth. In substituting ('reciprocating'?) one egoism for another in one more devastating version of a materialistic age that has dispensed with the vertical axis of the knowledge of the Transcendent, women like men, would seem to have lost their sense of community that would enable them to relate to one another or to any regenerative tradition. The latter could only come from a unitary point, the center of a circumference and its numinous core.

As if to confirm the unitary conception of social life, over and beyond any of its contingent binary fissures, she touches base with the Quranic discourse once more. Not only is an organizing principle of public life nurtured in the hearth, but even more, one of the exemplary moments in the conduct of public life is captured and projected through that discourse by a woman - not unlike herself, who is held up as an exemplar for all, including men. This is the lesson learned in the encounter with a public (female) figure who is shown to outmatch in wit, wisdom, common-sense and judgement as well as in sheer (male) peers. Such is the example of the Queen of Sheba - Saba'.(27: 32, 15-44). To some, it might come as a surprise to find that an opportunity to effectively break with some

outmoded conventions in society, as much as in scholarship, may ultimately lie in revisiting the sources of a transcendental and divine discourse.

A Recap

It is evident that our redefinition of the Woman Question and its relocation in a more inclusive framework has exposed it as a question that involves more than women: its ramifications embrace the community. A practical place to start taking stock was suggested in the family. Whatever the stipulations on women's role within that 'nuclear' social unit however extended or retrenched, needed to be understood in the course of a rethinking of its ethos-context implicit in the exigencies of mutuality, reciprocity, and continuity. As against androgynous speculation, the 'traditional' family remains the initial joint concern for both men and women as morally responsible social beings and provides them with the primary arena of exercising their moral agency. Only if this elementary bit of wisdom is conceded, or rather, remembered and re-acknowledged, does it become possible to address the various provisions invoking the multiple facets of a complex relationship centered on a much maligned, spurned, misconceived and ill-understood "domesticity". Outside a matrix of interdependent and binding reciprocity, responsible morality, and witting and conscientious agency any contentions about "equality", "antinomy", or "sexuality" have little meaning. Indulging in incriminating subjectivities might have a therapeutic value for its practitioners, but may be as irrelevant to the real issues at stake as it is irresponsible. It means fragmenting issues and reducing them to narrow and exclusivist concerns; it denies a valid point of reference beyond a mute, mutating, and often a self-mutilated self and it verges on an abrasive exercise in multiplying and perpetuating perceived injustices and grievances in society at large and among its individual members. The noose is then drawn tighter still and a new cycle of oppression is initiated to the detriment of all. The plight of women becomes the affliction of a generation, the malaise of a culture and the downfall of a civilization. Seen from a *humanistic* (=feminist is whole) tawhidi perspective, it may be justly stated that the Woman Question is ultimately the Social Question of modernity.

One of the enduring merits of a contemporary feminist scholarship is its sense of engagement and unflinching commitment to a cause. Revisiting the woman question from a soul-searching tawhidi perspective would undoubtedly share that sense of commitment at the same time as it ventures to redefine and relocate the cause. In doing so, the above presentation merely points out a direction, rather than fulfilling a conception. It does so against the background of an ongoing debate in interested circles in western academy and public discourse about the issue/issue-

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area of Women in Islam proffering insights for its general re-appraisal and redress. More generally, its observations could be meaningful for reconsidering the Woman Question in a modern setting, regardless of which societies are at issue. In suggesting possibilities for an alternative construction of norms of social inquiry and social action, it sees an Islamic perspective as having a universal intellectual and social relevance. It points up the significance of a critical reflection, deflection, and restitution of the underlying matrix of inquiry into a subject which has continued to generate much heat and sensation at the expense of a far more needed concord and sensibility.

Unlike any other 'objective inquiry' the Woman Question cannot be reified except at the peril of undermining the very source of life and every vestige of human civility. In the absence of a more concordant (as opposed to the 'combative') sensibility, women's studies and feminist scholarship are denied a potentially significant resource in alimending and rectifying current perspectives, while an equally promising dynamic and vital field of contemporary study in the department of Islamics wallows in a crippling and imposed parochiality. The observations made above are intended to promote a more attentive and critical attitude to prevailing concepts in the relevant literature. They also point to possibilities of an alternative framework which appropriates non-conventional categories and includes some potentially radical and constructive concepts in ploughing a field which has hitherto received scant attention. In reconsidering the language of such an inquiry too, even the "nuts and bolts" of social science may stand to benefit from an openness in deploying its metaphors - even where these may seem to liberals and advocates of a new age consciousness to evoke a less evolved and more primordial stage in the ascension of humanity.