

Feminist Theology and Social Control of Women

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Original Paper 

March 2004

<https://www.academia.edu/45255795/>

[Th%C3%A9ologie f%C3%A9ministe et contr%C3%B4le social des femmes](#)

“I am truly free only when all the
human beings around me, men and women,
are equally free.”
(Michel Bakunin, *God and the State*.)

The demand for gender equality in Muslim society is pushing some women to adopt an approach that could be described as “theological”. According to them, the political or economic struggle for this equality is distorted by an error that is more than a thousand years old in the interpretation of the Quran. This error of interpretation has created constraints that must be combated, and no progress in the condition of women will be possible until women have reappropriated the Quran. Since the specific male-female relations of Islam are anchored in theology, it is therefore necessary to challenge the theological

foundations of the misogynistic tendencies of the Islamic tradition. Until this has been done, women will continue to be victims of discrimination, despite the superficial improvements they may benefit from.

We see that this current grants a preeminent function to the ideological structures of society which would make any evolution in the condition of women impossible. The main fight would therefore not be in the access of women to education, to work, to participation in political and social life, all things likely to modify the inferior status of women, but in the constitution of a new theology which would correct the errors of interpretation hitherto dominant¹. It is the current interpretation of the Quran, erroneous, which would be the cause of unjust structures which make equality between men and women impossible.

The essential question, it seems to us, is thus avoided: what is it that makes the status of women in Muslim societies still, today, linked to the interpretation and application of texts written fourteen centuries ago? What is the historical, political, social, psychological explanation for such immobility?

1 This article is largely based on information obtained from documents published by: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, International Coordination Office, PO Box 28445, London, N19 5NZ, UK, Email: wluml@wluml.org. The section on 'feminist theology' is a commentary on the article by Riffat Hassan, 'Equal Before Allah? Woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition', cf. Woman Living Under Muslim Laws, Dossier 5/6, December 1988-May 1989. Riffat Hassan is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Louisville, Kentucky.

For a feminist theology?

According to the Islamic feminist movement, very few women today have the necessary skills to engage in historical and critical research on the earliest sources of Islam. Women must therefore invest themselves in the study of the original texts in order to re-establish the truth. In this text, we will refer to an article by Ms. Riffat Hassan, "Equal Before Allah? Woman man equality in the Islamic tradition", published in issue 5-6 of the journal *Women living under Muslim laws*, December 1988-May 1989.

Ms. Hassan's approach, which could be described as idealist in the sense that it grants ideology a determining role in the formation of the structures of society, is nevertheless interesting in the light it sheds on the question of male-female relations not only in Muslim societies but also in all Christian societies.

In all of these religious traditions, there is a presupposition that establishes the superiority of man over woman:

1. God created man first; woman is said to have been created from the rib of man.
2. It is the woman who bears the responsibility for the fall of man and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden.
3. Woman was created for man, which gives her an accessory status.

According to Ms. Hassan, believers of the three religious traditions believe that Adam was created first and that Eve was created from his rib. Ms. Hassan seems to take for granted the fact that Western societies today have a relationship with religion of the same type as Muslim societies in which atheism, or at least indifference to religion, is perceived as

incomprehensible²; she does not seem to perceive that religion in Western societies is, for a large part of the population, a private matter, or even simply a non-matter³ – there are no longer many people who believe that the creation of man (and woman) was done in accordance with the biblical story. For the vast majority of Westerners – except in the United States – the theory of evolution has nevertheless made some mark on people's minds. Apart from a few Christian fundamentalists, the majority of European believers see the biblical story as an allegory, a symbol.

While the average Muslim is convinced of this ontologically accessory origin of women, such a belief, which according to Ms. Hassan comes from the Bible, contradicts the Quran. The collective unconsciousness of Muslims is therefore deeply marked by the Judaic and Christian point of view on women. Muslims, as a whole, having no knowledge of the Bible, it is not possible for them “to evaluate to what extent their views concerning women (and particularly with regard to their creation and their responsibility in the fall) have been influenced by Jewish and Christian tradition rather than by the Quran”. The theological foundation of the dominated condition

2 In France, 33% of people are declared atheists. Despite the difficulty of establishing statistics, and the fact that research methods are not identical, in addition to the fact that the terms used are not standardised (atheist, non-believer, agnostic, ‘no religion’, etc. there are said to be 85% atheists in Sweden, 35% in the United Kingdom, 21% in Belgium, 40% in the Czech Republic. In 2023, the Pew Research Center published new figures on atheism in the United States. In a study entitled ‘[Religious “Nones” in America: Who They Are and What They Believe](#)’, the statistics organisation also reports the rapidly increasing trend of atheists: they accounted for only 16% in 2007, reaching 28% in 2023.

3 40% of Americans do not believe in evolution.

of women in Muslim societies is therefore to be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition!

“The seeds of the subjection of women and their predilection for evil must be found in Hebrew culture and in the Hebrew religious tradition.”⁴

This is a very clumsy way of dodging the debate. Now for Ms Hassan, this is an essential point if we want to develop “a feminist theology anchored in the Quran”: according to her, the link between women and the Fall has been widely exploited in the Christian tradition – which is perfectly true, but which does not exonerate Islam and Islamic societies from their own responsibilities in the affair.

At this level of her reflection, the author makes an observation that seems paradoxical to her: while a growing number of Jews and Christians “reject traditional interpretations of the creation of woman”, Muslims, generally ignorant of Christian and Jewish religious literature, continue to cling to them, perceiving this tradition as “essential to preserve the integrity of the Islamic way of life”.

It is not certain that the evolution, insufficient, certainly, but nevertheless positive, of the status of women in Western societies is due to a rejection of “traditional interpretations of the creation of women”. We would be tempted rather to see this evolution in a complex set of economic, technical, social, political factors which have made women insert themselves into the life of society and fight to claim their share – a fight which is not over. Another factor which seems important to us is the progressive affirmation in Western cultures of the

4 Sheila Collins, *A different Heaven and Earth*, quoted by Riffat Hassan.

importance of the individual – which should not be confused with individualism.

It goes without saying that, if one considers ideology (in this case in the form of theology) as a primary determination, one should be surprised to note that the Christian tradition, designated as responsible (theologically speaking) for the subjection of women in Islamic societies, has come to reject this notion. It is not envisaged that a civilization can, at a given moment in its historical development, be predominantly dominated by a form of thought, and that it can, at another moment, relativize this form of thought, or even reject it. A given ideology (or a religion) as a primary determination of the behavior of mankind – in the generic sense – would therefore not be likely to evolve, and even less to dissolve. This is a form of fundamentalism, even if the authors who demand a place for women in today's society come up against other fundamentalists. Women have only been able to gradually acquire a place in Western societies because the ideological basis of women's subjection – religion – has been progressively undermined. It should be noted that this struggle for equal rights is far from over...

It is this essentially religious approach to the issue that undoubtedly prevents Ms Hassan from perceiving the causes of the developments that have marked Western societies and from which Islamic societies have been kept apart.

The real question is: is there a match between Western society and Christian tradition? In other words, is it the Christian tradition that has abandoned the idea of the subordination of women, or is it Western society that has freed itself from the influence of religion that endorses this subordination? The reader will no doubt have guessed that we share the second

hypothesis. Ms. Hassan, faithful in this to the tradition to which she claims to belong, even reviewed and corrected through the “feminist” prism, does not seem to be able to envisage an approach that is not religious to the question. She does not seem to perceive that considering the emancipation of women from a religious point of view, even in a minimal form, constitutes a trap from which she cannot escape.

In the West, and particularly in France (I will confine myself to the French case), the religious tradition has not at all abandoned its usual ideological jumble about the subordination of women, but this idea is far from dominating public opinion: it is confined to small circles of Christian fundamentalists.

The emancipation of women in Western countries is not the result of religion abandoning its misogynistic presuppositions; it results from several combined factors:

1. A relatively long economic and social evolution, at least two centuries, which has gradually marked mentalities⁵;
2. The role of science which has gradually marked mentalities;
3. The political struggle by women, in which many men have joined;

5 In reality, the evolution began much earlier in the Christian societies of Western Europe: as early as the 12th century, when philosophy began to detach itself from theology. This very long evolution, dotted with countless victims tortured and burned alive because they professed free and critical thought, has simply accelerated in the last two centuries. Obviously, I will not expand on this issue here. It is no doubt no coincidence that the trigger for this development was an Arab thinker, Averroes (1126-1198). Muslim countries experienced a period of expansion of critical thinking. The abrupt halt of this process is called the ‘closing of the doors of Ijtihad’.

4. The rejection of religion in a great part of the population, or at least its relegation to the private sphere⁶.

It is *against* religion that progress in the condition of women has been made. Fundamentally, religion retains its initial presuppositions, but in the face of the weight of public opinion in favor of women's rights, it judges it more appropriate to leave this aside (without ever abandoning the idea of taking the offensive again whenever possible)⁷.

This observation is of course difficult to accept for Ms Hassan, because it would imply on the one hand the questioning of her approach – seeking in Islam itself the foundations of equality between men and women –, and on the other hand the observation that it is against religion itself that women must fight, in the same way that Western women have had to fight against the regressive positions of their religious hierarchies.

If we stick to the theological approach, Mrs Hassan's point of view is nevertheless not without interest.

According to her, there is no reference in the Quran to the creation of Adam and Eve. The Hebrew word *adam*, which means “of the earth”, is a generic term for humanity: it would therefore be a mistake to translate “adam” as “man” in the

6 Visiting the North of England, I saw a sign at the entrance to a town saying: ‘Don't claim your rites’. An obvious play on words.

7 The obstinate refusal of contraception by the Catholic Church is clearly motivated by a desire to maintain social control over women. If contraception ceases to be a sin, the feeling of guilt associated with transgressing the forbidden – the linchpin of any process of mind control – disappears. The religious hierarchy thus loses an essential means of its power of control over women. Knowing that the Church's ban on condoms is responsible for an incalculable number of AIDS deaths does not prevent the Pope and his cronies from sleeping.

masculine sense or to give it the meaning of the proper name Adam.

If the word “Adam” occurs 25 times in the Quran, there would be no categorical assertion that he was the first human being created by Allah.

This word is a collective noun that corresponds to humanity and is not used for a particular human being. The Quran would use other words (*bashar*, *al-insan* or *an-nas*) to designate the process of the physical creation of human beings; it uses Adam more selectively, to designate human beings as representatives of a self-conscious, knowing, and morally autonomous humanity.

Regarding Eve, the Quran uses the word *zauj*, referring not only to human beings but also to all creation, including animals, plants, and fruits. Since Muslims today consider Adam to be the first human being and do not dispute that he was a man, one might infer that the *zauj* of the Quran would correspond to Eve. However, the Quran does not establish that Adam was the first human being or that the first human being was a man. The word *adam* is masculine, but so is the word *zauj*. And while the word *adam* has no feminine equivalent, *zauj* has a feminine counterpart, *zaujatum*, which does not have the meaning of “woman” or “wife” but has the generic meaning of “spouse.”

The Quran uses the masculine noun *zauj* and not its feminine *zaujatum* to designate Adam's spouse. According to Riffat Hassan, the Quran deliberately does not specify the terms *adam* and *zauj*, either in gender or number, because its purpose is not to narrate particular events in the lives of a man and a

woman – the Adam and Eve of popular imagination – but to evoke the existence of all human beings, men and women.

According to Mrs Hassan, the Quran refers to the Creation of humanity in two different ways in about thirty passages:

- As an evolutionary process where different stages are mentioned separately or simultaneously.
- As an act accomplished in its entirety.

In the passage where Creation is described in a concrete way, there is no mention of a separate creation of man and woman. Furthermore, in the passages where there is mention of a creation of sexually differentiated partners, no superiority is granted to one or the other. That Allah's Creation is a sexually undifferentiated humanity, and that man and woman appeared simultaneously is, says Ms. Hassan, “implicit in many Quranic passages.”

But then why do Muslims believe that Eve was created from Adam's rib? The author does not think that this version of the creation of woman entered the Islamic tradition directly, although the story in *Genesis* chapter 2 is, she says, accepted by virtually all Muslims. Indeed, says Ms. Hassan, very few Muslims read the Bible. This thesis therefore probably entered the Islamic vulgate through the *hadith*, that is, the stories of the companions of the prophet that were subsequently compiled.⁸

8 The *ahadith* (plural of *hadith*) are a compilation of sayings that the Prophet is said to have made and that were reported by tradition. There is a certain hierarchy in the *ahadith* that defines their degree of authority: a) The sayings reported by a companion of the Prophet; b) The sayings reported by at least two disciples; c) The sayings reported by numerous narrators. The *ahadith* are the second source after the Quran on which Muslim theology draws. They have been transmitted orally. The two authoritative compilations among Sunnis date from the

In support of her thesis, Ms Hassan cites a *hadith* which, on the one hand, contradicts the Quran, but which is clearly inspired by *Genesis* (2:18-33):

“When Iblis was sent away by God from the Garden and Adam was placed there, he had no one to keep him company. God caused sleep to fall upon him and took a rib from his left side and put flesh in its place and created Hawwa. When he awoke he found a woman sitting near his head. He asked her: ‘Who were you created?’ She replied: ‘Woman.’ He said: ‘Why were you created?’ She said: ‘That you may find rest in me.’ The angels said: ‘What is her name?’ And he said: ‘Hawwa.’ They said: ‘Why was she named Hawwa?’ He said: ‘Because she was created from a living being’.”

There are, however, certain modifications in the story as narrated in the *hadith*. It is a rib from the left side that is the cause of the creation of the woman – the left being an inauspicious one.

In *Genesis*, the woman is named Eve after the Fall while in the *hadith* she is named Hawwa from the beginning. In *Genesis*, the woman is called Eve because she is “the mother of all living,” but in the *hadith*, she is called Hawwa because she was created from a living being: in the first case she is the source of all life; in the second she is a derived creature, says Ms.

9th century. Most of the aspects of Islam that shock Westerners are found in the *hadiths*, but these are practically as valuable as the verses of the Quran itself. Some Muslims respond to the criticisms made of them by saying, ‘But it’s not in the QuQuran’, without specifying that it is in the *hadiths*...

Hassan, who wants to show that, concerning woman, the biblical materials are incorporated into the Islamic tradition with alterations. However, if the story of the rib clearly comes from *Genesis*, there is no mention of Adam in the *ahadith*, which depersonalizes the origin of the creation of woman.

The original Islam, that of the Quran, would therefore have been distorted by the *hadiths*. Moreover, subsequently, many of them would have become “invisible” because the commentators no longer referred to them but to the authority of commentators who would have referred to them to support their interpretation, which made it impossible to re-establish the original meaning. The misogynistic tradition is found in the two collections of *hadiths* that are considered the second authority after the Quran. “The theology of women that is implicit in the *hadiths* is based on generalizations about their ontology, biology, and psychology that are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Quran,” says Riffat Hassan. “These *hadiths* should be rejected on their content alone.” Especially since these *hadiths* are said to be based on the authority of Abu Hurairah, a companion of the Prophet who is highly controversial among many early Muslim scholars.

Ms. Hassan aims to show that the egalitarian account of Creation has been distorted by the content of the *ahadiths*. This question of Creation is essential, from a philosophical and theological point of view, because if man and woman were created equal by God, they cannot subsequently become unequal: the observation of their inequality in a patriarchal world is therefore in contradiction with the divine plan. On the other hand, “if man and woman were created unequal by God, then they cannot become equal” because any attempt to make them equal is contrary to God's intention. This is a terrifying approach to the question: if the Good Lord had explicitly

declared: “Woman is inferior to man”, Mrs. Hassan would submit to this diktat... Fortunately, the Good Lord, or his certified interpreters, are rarely very precise.

Naturally, all this argumentation is distorted by the rejection of the hypothesis that would reduce this question to nothing: God does not exist.

The only way for the daughters of Eve to end their subjection to the sons of Adam is to “return to the point of origin and challenge the authenticity of the *ahadith* which show them as derivative and secondary beings in Creation, and which put them in the forefront in terms of guilt, their sinfulness, their mental and moral deficiency. They must challenge the later sources which regard them not as ends in themselves but as instruments created for the use and comfort of men.”

We can obviously only share Ms Hassan's concern about the emancipation of Muslim women, but we can have many reservations about the effectiveness of her approach. That the Quran has been misinterpreted and that its initial message has been distorted by commentators is something that can be understood, but we will be careful not to engage in this debate. We are even more tempted to believe, with Riffat Hassan, that the message of the Prophet has been distorted, that the message of Jesus Christ has also been somewhat perverted. Poverty, nonviolence, compassion, charity and all this sort of thing that is part of the stock-in-trade of Christianity has not been precisely put into practice over the centuries, as the history of Western societies shows. We can therefore consider it an established fact that between the “basic” discourse of a religion, whatever it may be, and its practice, there is always a great distance; The problem is therefore to know what is the basis of this distance, and we are not inclined to believe that it

is simply found in the fact that the founding texts have simply been misinterpreted. There must be something else.

Reasoning by contradiction⁹ perhaps provides insight into the relevance of Riffat Hassan's approach: if the Prophet's message had not been distorted, would the fate of women have fundamentally changed in societies where Islam has been imposed?

It is hard to believe that the good or bad interpretation of a religious message can to this extent modify the weight of the determinisms that shape economic, social and political structures. It is strictly the same thing for the societies in which Christianity has taken root.

That the status of women has undergone changes compared to the *Jahilliya* (pre-Islamic society) is not debatable, but it is doubtful that changes could have been introduced, even if this had been the intention of the Prophet, to the point of fundamentally upsetting the socio-political balance of the time based on a triumphant patriarchy. In short, there was not much room for maneuver. The characteristic of a religion with a universal vocation is to adapt to the social structures of the countries where it is established – in other words, it makes do with reality – otherwise it remains in the state of a sect. The characteristic of a sect is to deny the reality of the surrounding world and to want to make it fit into its own ideological patterns. Now, this is precisely what distinguishes early Islam from today's Islamic fundamentalism.

9 *Reductio ad absurdum* is a form of logical, philosophical or scientific reasoning that consists of either demonstrating the truth of a proposition by proving the absurdity of the contrary proposition.

The incredible paradox of history is that early Islam developed only thanks to its ability to adapt to the societies in which it took root, while today's Islamic fundamentalism refuses any adaptation to modern society (except, of course, for the technological means by which it spreads its ideas...). The Prophet would probably not have forbidden women to drive a car, as is the case in Saudi Arabia (but not in Iran...). Unless one of his relatives had advised him that it was politically inopportune, after which the Good Lord conveniently appeared to him in the form of a nocturnal revelation to forbid it. The universalism of early Islam is based on moral values, which no one denies, but it is also based on its adaptability to reality. Today's fundamentalism refers to texts dating back fourteen centuries that are supposed to remain fully valid in today's societies, without any adaptation. In this, fundamentalism is the worst enemy of Islam. Let us recall that the notion of "fundamentalism" implies a literal reference to the founding texts.

If the question of Creation is "essential" from a philosophical and theological point of view, it is essential only from that point of view, and this is what distinguishes the Muslim approach from the Western approach to the question. A Parisian or New York anthropologist may possibly ask himself the question at home, comfortably seated in his armchair with his cat on his lap, sipping cognac and smoking his pipe, whether Eve was created from Adam's rib. But at work he will concentrate on serious matters.

To say that if it were proven that God's intention was that man and woman be unequal, then we should bow to the divine will amounts to trying to solve the wrong problem: we should rather wonder why men wanted God to exist, and why he would have decided that woman should be inferior. From the moment you realise that it was man who created God and not the other way

round, and that he created him within the framework of a patriarchal society, you understand why God advocates the subordination of women to men.

Obviously, to pose the question in this way is to call into question the existence of God.

If Mrs. Riffat Hassan's approach dismisses the weight of the society of the Arabian Peninsula of the 7th or 8th century in the constitution of Islam in the first centuries, it also does not allow us to perceive the social determinisms that shape the most radical options of today's Islam, obsessively oriented towards the subordinate role of women. The question is: why on earth does man create a God who wants to keep women in subjection at all costs? The answer seems quite clear to us: this man is afraid of women.

Social control of women

Two main questions arise when considering the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the last twenty years: who are the men and (women) who constitute its social base; and why did the phenomenon appear at this time?

It would be a mistake to imagine that the social classes that most forcefully raise the question of the “decency” of women today, and that constitute the breeding ground for Islamist forces, are made up of uneducated and easily manipulated masses. The activity of the Muslim Brotherhood is concentrated on the poor, but also on the classes of society that benefit from average or even higher education. Executives, doctors, engineers and lawyers, teachers, employees of the private and public sectors, constitute a significant part of their recruitment: they are educated men of the middle class.

For these social classes, the question of women's behaviour was relatively unresolved one or two generations ago, since the “liberation of women”, understood in the sense of imitation by certain women of the Western model, was limited to the layers of the Arab upper middle class whose women appeared in public, and did not affect the most popular classes.

In traditional society, women were not absent, but in the fields or in the markets, they had a well-defined place in the sexual division of labor linked to a patriarchal order.

Today the situation has completely changed with the emergence of new social structures related to women's work and education. In this sense, state policies have largely contributed to these changes by imposing compulsory schooling for young girls. They have the opportunity to leave their homes and frequent an environment that is not limited to the family. The same is true when they work. We are therefore in a situation of profound change that greatly disrupts the usual structures of society by the collapse of the gap that separates women from the sight of men. At school or at work, women find themselves in an environment in which they are with men and women who are not related and relatively escape the social control of the family. It is significant that the most fundamentalist Muslims endeavour to limit or eliminate girls' access to education.

Thirty years ago, women from the upper middle class adopted Western behavior and dress customs. The female workforce from this class represented a tiny fraction of the population: this situation did not disrupt the patriarchal social order. Today, women who appear in the public sphere are no longer exclusively from the urban upper middle class. Women's access to education and work has led to a change in the social

composition of the workforce in many sectors where women are making their mark: the education system, health, civil service, and also sometimes in skilled or highly skilled jobs. They are teachers, sometimes in higher education, secretaries, receptionists, and increasingly members of the liberal and technical professions. Economic independence, even relative, gradually leads to changes in women's mentalities. This has therefore significantly changed the traditional context, making it urgent, in the eyes of Islamists, to raise the question of public behavior and dress (the "decency") of women.

Women have gradually become more and more present in public life, their role is more and more necessary and impossible to hide: we can therefore say that they literally contribute to creating and developing a petty bourgeoisie, the role of which in Western societies is well known. Women's access to education, jobs and positions inevitably leads them to demand a legitimate place in society... including the right to interpret the QuQuran.

This phenomenon can be transposed to the framework of the immigrant population of Western countries, where girls obviously benefit from compulsory schooling. The traditional Muslim family structure constitutes a handicap for the social advancement of young men insofar as male preeminence and the subjugation of girls does not prepare boys to face a world in which they will not be kings; girls on the contrary will tend to work hard and will often have academic results clearly superior to their brothers, while in the family sphere, they will be relegated to a subordinate status. Fundamentalism will therefore have the function of maintaining these girls in this subordinate state, failing which they risk escaping patriarchal control.

A survey published in the 1980s showed that about 50% of young men of Muslim origin married or settled down with non-Muslim French girls; the rate for Muslim girls settling down with non-Muslim boys was 25%, which, given the context, was a lot. In two or three generations, girls of Muslim origin would have been completely assimilated. However, it seems that this trend has completely stopped. One can therefore wonder whether Islamic fundamentalism does not have the function of combating this assimilation and of maintaining the community's social control over its women.

Islamic fundamentalism seems to be the expression, rooted in the popular layers of Arab society, of a movement of resistance to the inevitable social developments that will cause men and, more generally, families, to lose control over women. It is a reaction against changes in gender relations that extend far beyond the privileged layers of the population. The question of women's conduct in public therefore becomes, for fundamentalists, a social phenomenon insofar as women's access to education and work has large-scale repercussions on the patriarchal order. It seems obvious that a young woman in a full veil has no chance of finding a job. If the massive diffusion of traditional clothing behaviour among women is often the result of male pressure and sometimes even extreme violence (especially acid throwing), the explanation cannot be limited to that.

The discourse of the feminists of the urban bourgeoisie of the Maghreb or Middle Eastern countries of thirty years ago remains incomprehensible to women who today access the world of work and who often wear the veil. These feminists are perceived as Westernized bourgeois women, and the Westernized woman of the upper classes of society is

designated as the symbol of what is both inaccessible and corrupt.

Women entering the labour market today have benefited from the progress made in higher education for women over the last twenty or thirty years, progress necessitated by a growing need in the public sector for personnel, which has made it possible to integrate many female teachers, school principals and office workers. Many of these women come from families that previously would never have provided an education for their daughters. They are not necessarily attracted by the image of the “modern” woman given by their elders from the bourgeoisie of the 1960s or 1970s and are not necessarily attracted by their lifestyle. Nor do they feel obliged to follow the fashions of their younger Western contemporaries – “grunge”, ripped jeans, etc.

Women from the “Westernized” bourgeoisie who enter the job market or, more generally, who enter the public sphere have been able to benefit from a “transition period” due to the fact that they were raised in environments in which Western codes, values, and behaviors are not foreign. On the contrary, the transition to professional life for women from the more popular, essentially conservative, classes can cause real anxiety linked to their feeling of vulnerability. Islamist discourse can provide these women with precise codes on how a woman should behave in today's world. The adoption of customary codes of behavior is perhaps a way of reconciling traditional ideas about women and the imperatives of a society undergoing profound change.

Adherence to fundamentalism is a form of resistance to Western modernism. It is also a cultural resistance against the colonial legacy whose “civilizing mission” was perceived as an

aggression against Muslim identity. This “civilizing mission” intended to reform Muslim family customs and traditions, which were the main subject of attack by the colonizers against Islam. The family was the place of contestation of the colonial order which its representatives could hardly penetrate. It is in this capacity that feminism was assimilated to one of the forms of cultural imperialism of the West. Muslims, men or women, who tried to change this order of things were considered traitors.

The Muslim woman becomes the symptom by which to assess the degree of integration of society with Western values. The very limited presence of women in the public sphere thirty years ago did not pose a problem; their emergence today is really affecting the middle strata through the social consequences that this may have and is worrying many men in these social strata.

Unable to deny the economic and technical superiority of the West and consequently its political superiority, nor to propose an alternative on this same terrain, fundamentalism focuses its discourse on the register of moral values by trying to demonstrate the superiority of Islam over Western amorality.

This shows how wrong the American propagandists and media are when they attribute Islamist attacks to resentment towards the ‘American way of life’. The appeal of the American model, namely a prosperous, free, pluralistic society, which gives women the same rights as men, has little hold on the majority of Muslims,

Basing themselves on Sayyid Qutb, fundamentalists say that the West is a society based on freedom while the Islamic world is based on virtue. Qutb emphasizes in his works how freedom is misused in Western countries. Islamic societies may be poor, he says, but they are trying to fulfill the will of God: Islamic

law is the will of God, it is necessarily above all human law. Virtue is a principle higher than freedom.¹⁰

The price the West pays for its material superiority is precisely its moral degeneration. Fundamentalist literature is full of these images of the naked, debased Western woman, offering her body to everyone, and who respects neither marriage nor family.

Unable to resist the economic and political power of the West, fundamentalists reaffirm their authority in an area in which they can intervene: women and morality. Women become the place and symbol of resistance. That is why fundamentalists who gain access to power thanks to democracy, that invention of the degenerate West, start by trying to implement measures concerning male-female relations. The status of women acquires a primordial importance in the fundamentalist program.

The question of women's clothing becomes a political question, and the fundamentalists' plan is to exclude this question from the realm of personal choice. The wearing of the veil becomes a matter of public social control because the social strata that constitute the social base of fundamentalism are directly affected by the consequences of the new social relations. The fundamentalists intend to fight against Western ideological pollution by creating, from disparate elements, an alternative that would eliminate the “modern” aspects of society and restore traditional values. It is also significant that the main

10 Incidentally, Qutb seems to have rejected any kind of government, secular or theocratic. One author even goes so far as to claim that he advocated, in one of his writings, a sort of “anarcho-Islam”... (“Is this the Man Who Inspired Bin Laden?” Robert Irwin, *The Guardian*, November 1, 2001.)

doctrinaires of fundamentalism are neither religious nor theologians but “civilians” (I dare not speak of “secular” ...): whether it be Maudoudi¹¹, Sayyid Qotb¹² ... or even Ben Laden ...

If women are the first victims of Western corruption, they are also at the forefront of the fight *against* this corruption and, as such, they must rigorously apply the precepts of religion. Muslim societies are engaged in a war in which the “purity” of women – that is, male control over them – plays a central role. To disperse oneself in futilities, in seduction and indecency is therefore to open the door to the invader, a betrayal that plays into the hands of the enemy in his temptation to want to corrupt the Muslim nation.

The fight against Western degeneration is led by men who put women on the front line, and women are also the first victims of this fight. It is unlikely, under these conditions, that theological considerations on what the Quran really said about the condition of women will touch these men.

11 Maulana Abul Maudoudi (1903-1979) is a Pakistani, founder of the Jamat-i-Islami, a radical Islamist movement that was both religious and political, from which the Taliban movement in Afghanistan would later emerge. He justifies the absolute primacy of the “good Muslim” and the use of violence. He opposes the teaching of the ulama (Islamic theologians) of the famous Quranic faculty of Deoband who advocate a ritualistic and quietist Islam.

12 The writings of Qotb, bin Laden's inspiration, provided the main themes of Islamic fundamentalism: opposition to the corruption introduced by the Western world; opposition to the colonial presence; opposition to modern materialism. Society therefore had to be re-Islamised, including through violence by assassinating political leaders who were complicit in Western corruption. Qotb was executed by the Nasser regime in 1966.

As in the West, the demand for equal rights will not be able to avoid a political fight, even if man, and God, his creation, have decided otherwise
