Chapter V
Modern Times

True Islam is hidden behind tragic events caused by obscurantist Islamists, misrepresented by the media. These events must not overshadow genuine currents of thought turned toward progress and the renewal of Islamic thinking. Is Islam compatible with modernity? Why do Muslims have difficulties with a critical examination of the Qur'ān? Is violence inseparable from religion? Is Islam compatible with secularism? These are some questions that will have to be addressed by Muslims in order to continue to follow the Islamic way of life in this new millennium. The issues should revolve around democracy, secularism, *sharī'a* (religious law), and human rights. Needless to say, many Muslims have an optimistic view of the evolving capacities of Islam; some Modern Muslims are conscious that many political activities done in the name of Islam are, in fact, un-Islamic and some are even ready to consider a separation of religion and politics. This chapter is divided into three sections. The intent of the first section is not to do a survey of all the Muslim thinkers of the modern period but to select two influential Muslim thinkers as an illustration of modern trends. The second section focuses on trying to define various types of terrorism and relates briefly the tragic event of 9/11. The third section deals with how women are perceived in Islam. The problem of inequity due to gender is not limited to the Muslim world. It exists in almost every culture. It is difficult however to cover modern Islam without raising issues related to women due to the existence of many Western prejudices about Islam.

Al-Afghānī and Muhammad 'Abduh

Jamāl al-dīn al-Afghānī (1838-97), claimed to be a *sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet, and an Afghan. But his nephew wrote a book confirming that he was raised in Persia and had a Shī'ī education in Najaf and Karbalā' (Lutfallāh Khān, 46ff.). His original name was Jamāl al-dīn Asadābādī. Therefore he was a Shī'ī *sayyid* who was calling himself Afghan because he worked most of his life in places where the Sunnī viewpoint prevailed. Al-Afghānī went later in his youth to study in India where he was fully educated in the Islamic tradition, sciences and mathematics. Then he moved to Afghanistan where he engaged himself in local

politics. Later, in 1884, he joined Muhammad ʿAbduh in Paris and together they founded a secret society of Muslims for the reform of Islam. Muhammad ʿAhduh and al-Afghānī published eighteen issues of an Arabic periodical, *al-ʿUrwa al-wuthqā.* This journal was devoted to analyzing the colonial policies of European powers in the Muslim world, particularly those of England in Egypt and Sudan. They wanted to examine the problems of Muslims and to invite them to reflect and find solutions for those issues. This Arabic periodical became very influential at that time.

Al-Afghānī spent most of his life defending Islamic countries threatened by the danger of European expansion. For him, the central problem of Muslims came from the fact that Muslims did not understand their religion properly and did not live in accordance with its teachings. He believed that if they understood the principles of their faith and practiced them, they would automatically become stronger. This inner weakness of Muslims was coupled with the outer danger coming from European powers. He knew that the political and economic successes of Europe were due to knowledge and its appropriate application, and that the flaws of the Muslim world were due to ignorance. Muslims were weak because their society was in decay. Therefore Muslims must learn the useful knowledge of Europe. The objective of Muslims is not only the service of God but the creation of a human civilization. (Hourani, 114)

The idea of civilization was central in the philosophy of nineteenth-century Europe, and al-Afghānī wanted to transmit this idea to the Muslim world. The emergence of this civilization was seen as the most crucial of all historical facts and that by which other facts should be assessed. The people of this civilization wanted to improve their condition, their social status, and the development of their human faculties. The appeal for unity is a theme recurrent in the works of al-Afghānī; Muslims should give more importance to the practice of Islamic values (such as treating all Muslims as their brothers) instead of focusing on differences of doctrine and traditions. Differences of school of thought should not be a political obstacle, and Muslims should learn from the experience of Germany, which lost its national unity by giving too much weight to differences of religion. Even the deepest of doctrinal abysses, that between Sunnīs and Shīʿites, could be bridged. Thus Shīʿī Persians and Sunnī Afghans should unite; both branches of Islam ought to reconcile. Muslim countries should cooperate and put aside their dynastic interests for the cause of Islam. (Al-Afghānī and Muhammad ʿAbduh, vol. 2, 124ff)

Al-Afghānī had a low esteem of the Muslim rulers of his time. They did not deserve their position; they did not care for the interests of their people but only for their own and therefore had fallen easy victims of the British. Contrary to the common opinion that Muslims must submit to an unjust ruler to avoid chaos, al-Afghānī believed in the right to revolt. For al-Afghānī, not only political leaders should cooperate but the entire community (*umma*) should as well. All members should desire to live together in the community and to work together for its welfare. Solidarity (*ta'assub*) was the power that held society together, and without which it would dissolve. Certainly, language is an indispensable element in creating a stable community; human groups that have no common language can possess no firm unity. Muslims should cooperate with men of different faiths for the national interests of their country. There should be solidarity beyond the nation that unites all the peoples of the East threatened by European power. The rescue of the *umma* could not therefore come from righteous rulers alone. Schools could raise the standard of public morality and spread the idea of unity. There would be no genuine reform of Islam unless the *'ulamā'* and the entire community returned to the truth of Islam. (Al-Afghānī and Muhammad 'Abduh, vol. 2, 42, 110; vol. 1, 138ff)

Al-Afghānī wishes both to correct false views about Islam held by Muslims and criticisms of Islam made by a few Europeans. Some Western scholars held that Islam, specifically, sapped the will and limited reason, and progress was only possible by forsaking it, or at least by separating religion from secular life. Al-Afghānī explained that in the childhood of mankind, man cannot distinguish good from evil by his own reason. But this was only a stage through which religions passed; in a later stage, men who could develop their reasoning ability restored religion to its proper place. This is what happened in Christianity at the time of the Reformation; Islam was many centuries younger and its reformation was still to come. Islam needed a Luther; once this reformation occurred, Islam would be as able as any other religion to play its essential role of providing moral guidance. (Hourani, 122)

Al-Afghānī believed that Islam was the only true religion which could satisfy all the great human aspirations. He accepted the judgment of Christianity expressed by European free thought: it was the unreasonable enemy of science and progress. But for him this criticism did not apply to Islam; on the contrary, Islam was in harmony with science and was, in fact, the religion demanded by reason. The glorious past of Islam in the Middle Ages in

term of scientific discoveries proved the case. Islam is neither irrational nor intolerant, but it has a universal mission to save the secular world from excessive materialism. For him, the essence of Islam is not incompatible with modern rationalism. As many Shīʿites al-Afghānī's view of Islam was a continuation of the Islamic philosophical tradition; he believed in the final identification of philosophy and Prophecy, that what the Prophet received through inspiration was the same as what the philosopher could reach by the proper use of his intellect. (Al--Afghānī, 1903, 176-177)

In 1870's, Sayyid Ahmad Khān began to preach a new philosophy of Islam based on the term "*nayshariyya*" (derived from the English word "nature"). The Qurʾān must be interpreted in line with reason and nature. Al-Afghānī disagreed with Ahmad Khān's view that the laws of nature, as understood by reason, were the norm by which Islam should be interpreted. According to al-Afghānī, the philosophy of Sayyid Ahmad was arguing that there was nothing which transcended the natural world; therefore man became the judge of all things. Al-Afghānī accused this doctrine of being a British plot against the Islamic faith in order to obliterate the unity of Muslims. Al-Afghānī wrote a work, *al-Radd 'ala' al-dhahriyyīn* (The Refutation of the Materialists), refuting this way of thinking that was endangering true religion. He called "materialists" all those who gave an explanation of the world not involving the existence of God. For him, this ideology was a danger to the well-being of Muslim society. True religions, he asserted, teach three truths above all: that man is sovereign on the earth, that his religious community is the best of all, and that the goal of man is to perfect himself in preparation of the hereafter. The adhesion to these truths helps the development of three virtues (modesty (*hayāʾ*), trust (*amāna*), and truthfulness (*sidq*)) that were the foundations of society. The materialists, by rejecting these truths, damage the foundation of society and reduce man to his animal function. (Al-Afghānī, 1903, 31, 39)

For al-Afghānī, Islam is rooted in a belief in transcendence and in the capacity of humans to use their intellect. It encourages humans to reason, to assert and confirm the truths revealed by Prophecy. Islam, more than any other religion, liberates the human mind from superstitions and allows the development of the human intellect to its full capacities. The human intellect, therefore, can fulfill itself in Islam because it is able to confirm that the religious law is the same as the law of nature. For al-Afghānī, reason should be used to the maximum in interpreting the Qurʾān. If the Qurʾān appears to be in contradiction with what is presently known, we should interpret it symbolically. All Muslims can interpret, as long as

they have enough knowledge of Arabic, have a sound mind and know the traditions. The door of *ijtihād* is not closed and it is the duty of Muslims to apply the principles of the Qur'ān anew to the problems of their time. For al-Afghānī, Islam invites Muslims to an attitude of responsible activity in doing the will of God. Man is responsible for all his acts and he is also responsible for the welfare of society. The laws of Islam are in conformity with the laws of human nature: if man follows the principles of Islam, he is also fulfilling the laws of his own nature, and so he will reach happiness and success in this world. The same applies to societies as to the individual; when societies follow the principles of Islam they become powerful, when they defy Islamic laws they become weak. Islam encourages solidarity and mutual responsibility necessary for the strength of nations. If Muslim peoples had grown weak, it was because they did not properly follow Islamic teaching. (Al-Afghānī and Muhammad 'Abduh, vol. 1, 161ff)

Muhammad 'Abduh was the disciple of al-Afghānī and he collaborated with him for a certain period of time. ʿAbduh was born in 1849 in a small village of the Egyptian delta. At the age of thirteen, he went to study at the Ahmadī mosque at Tanta. He did not like his studies but his maternal uncle, *Shaykh* Darwish, who influenced his early thinking, persuaded him not to stop. He returned to Tanta to finish his studies and, afterwards he went to the University al-Azhar in Cairo, where he settled from 1869 to 1877.

When al-Afghānī came back to Egypt in 1871, 'Abduh became his most devoted student, attending informal classes in his house. Under al-Afghānī, he was initiated to the study of philosophy. In 1877, he obtained from al-Azhar University the degree of *'alīm* (religious authority); afterwards he taught there and became preoccupied with examining the reasons for the inner decay of Islamic countries. 'Abduh was not against changes and progress. But for him there was a danger inherent to progress: it would divide the society into two separated spheres: a sphere, constantly diminishing, governed by the laws and moral principles of Islam, and another, continuously growing, governed by principles derived by human reason for worldly benefit. The threat came from a growing secularization of society. For 'Abduh, society to be moral must conform to a law of some sort. All created things must follow their natural laws; if they did not do so, they would be endangering themselves. Humans must follow the moral laws inspired from the divine commandments which set limits to human behavior. The ideal modern Muslim society could not be completed by a return to the past and by stopping the process of change. It could only be realized by acknowledging

the need for change, and by connecting that change to the principles of Islam. Islam should serve both as a principle of change and a beneficial control over it. (Hourani, 136-137)

‘Abduh wanted to convince mainly men of modern culture who doubted whether Islam, or any other religion, could be used as a guide for today's life. This class could become a threat to the *umma* (community), but if they were convinced that Islam was not against modernity, they could provide leadership for a revitalized *umma*. ‘Abduh wanted to show that Islam is a rational religion, containing the social science and moral code necessary to serve as a foundation to modern life; the Muslims needed to create an elite of *‘ulamā'* who would be able to correctly interpret the Qur'ān and to teach the true Islam and so provide the base for a firm and progressive society; this elite should be moderate in the middle of two extreme tendencies, those of being overly traditional or being overly revolutionary. The excessively traditional group would return to the past and adopt a way of life incompatible with modernity, while the very revolutionary group could even reject Islam in the name of progress. ‘Abduh did not believed that Islam would support everything that happened in the name of progress, quite the opposite; Islam was a principle of restraint enabling Muslims to distinguish what was good from what was bad and to select the beneficial changes in agreement with the Islamic way of life. The most important goal was to know what Islam really was and how it could be applied in a beneficial way in modern society. (Hourani, 140)

‘Abduh, like his predecessors (Tahtawī, Khayr al-Dīn, and al-Afghānī), believed Islam could be reconciled with modern thought. To argue his point ‘Abduh identified certain Islamic concepts with the central ideas of modern Europe: *maslaha* became utility, *shūrā* parliamentary democracy, *ijmā‘* public opinion. Islam was identified with civilization and activity (the standards of nineteenth-century social thought). For ‘Abduh, the key to all his thought was implying a distinction between what was essential and unchanging in Islam and what was inessential and could be transformed. True Islam, he upheld, had a simple doctrinal structure: it consisted of certain beliefs about the fundamental questions of human life and certain universal principles of human conduct. To understand the true Islam and practice it in their lives, Muslims needed both reason and revelation. Proper reasoning never conflicted with the revelation. In the search for all knowledge, we must use the human intellect, which can deduce the existence of God and the necessity for God to send Prophets. The human intellect has the capacity to distinguish between good and bad actions, but there are certain

essential things that it is unable to deduce (what will happen in the hereafter; how to worship God properly, etc.). ('Abduh, 1361/1942-3, 42ff, 61-62, 90)

Human reason properly used is able to recognize that Muhammad was a Prophet because of his tremendous impact on the history of the world and that the Qur'ān is a Divine miracle due to the magnificence of its language. But there are subjects in regard to which the Qur'ān and *hadīth*(s) give no clear guidance: because the text of the Qur'ān is ambiguous; or because there are doubts about the authenticity of the *hadīth*(s); or because Qur'ān or *hadīth*(s) assert only a general principle without giving example of a specific ruling; or because both Qur'ān and *hadīth*(s) are silent. In these cases, human reason must act as interpreter; *ijtihād* (individual thought) is therefore essential. Only those who have knowledge and intellectual power must exercise *ijtihād*; other Muslims must follow any doctor they trust. 'Abduh did not consider the principle of *ijmā'* as a third source of law and as being infallible; therefore the door of *ijtihād* should never be closed. A collective judgment of the community (*ijmā'*) done at a specific time in the past cannot forever become the rule for following generations because the present living conditions are completely different. Therefore, for 'Abduh, the ideal Muslim society is not based only on following the law but on the use of human intellect. The true Muslim uses his intellectual capacity in matters of religion while in fact it is the infidel (*kāfir*) who refuses to reason. ('Abduh, 1361/1942-3, 164; 'Abduh, 1341/1922-3, 169)

'Abduh attributed the cause of Islamic decay partly to certain Sufi brotherhoods. He was not against mysticism; it was right for Muslims to interiorize their way of practicing the law. But he was against those who gave devotion to their *Shaykh*(s), considering them as intermediaries between God and man, instead of worshipping God directly. In these Sufi brotherhoods, the disciple is subjected to the will of his spiritual Master so the activity of his individual thought is weakened. 'Abduh identified another cause of the decline of Islam as the fact that many Muslim leaders were not able to differentiate between what was essential and what was not. They placed on the same level the detailed regulations of early Islamic society with the principles of the faith. They put too much emphasis on adherence to the outward law, compelling Muslims to follow by blind imitation (*taqlīd*). The spread of *taqlīd* was due to the Turkish Empire, which supported a slavish acceptance of authority. The Turkish leaders did not understand the principles of true Islam, did not encourage Muslims to

acquire knowledge nor to use their reason. They created a class of *'ulamā'* that was corrupted by being subjected to their power. ('Abduh, 1367/1947-8, 134ff)

Besides progressive and relatively moderate Muslims such as al-Afghānī and Muhammad 'Abduh, who propose most of the time pacific solutions to solve the problems of the Muslim world, there is a minority of extremists who advocate the use of violence or threat to improve their condition. Their activities are a reflection of a deep crisis in the Muslim world. The reality is very complex and there are, in fact, a great variety of extremists who come from diverse countries and who act according to different motives.

Various Types of Terrorists and the Tragic Event of September 11, 2001

One of the first men to have inspired the contemporary activist movement was Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the father of Sunnī revolutionary Islam. He taught the Hanbalī law from the most conservative school with a strict and literal interpretation of sacred texts (the Qur'ān and *sunna*) to reform the society of his time. Like many who follow him, he considered the early Muslim community of Madīna as a model to establish the Islamic State. He wanted to reform the practice of Islam of his time by returning to the purity of the days of Muhammad and the first four Caliphs. He established a rigid distinction between the territory of Islam (*dār al-Islam*) and that of unbelief (*dār al-harb*). In his time, Mongolians, although they had converted to Islam, continued to govern the State under the laws of Genghis Khān. For Ibn Taymiyya, the Mongolians were just as bad as the polytheists of the pre-Islamic period of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) because they had failed to implement the religious law (*sharī'a*). Many recent activist movements (the Wahhābī movement; the Sayyid Qutb's in Egypt, the Islamic *jihād*; the assassins of Anwar al-Sadat and the Usama Bin Laden's) inspired themselves from the logic of Ibn Taymiyya, who condemned those Muslim leaders who were unable to implement the religious law (*sharī'a*).

The various jihādī movements in the Islamic world give the impression that Islam makes it obligatory for its followers to wage war. The Western media often equates Islam with violence and is more interested in sensational and negative headlines about the Muslim world than in presenting Islam as a religion promoting peace. These *jihādī* leaders themselves have limited understanding of Islam and have a vested interest in taking up arms or making some people fight – in the name of Islam – to promote their interests and legitimize their actions by quoting the Qur'ān or *hadīth*(s) (without referring to the real historical context).

The *jihādī* leaders have distorted the real meaning of *jihād* and the media often portray their false interpretation of Islam as being what the religion of Islam promotes. They often kill innocent people for their political benefit and pass it off as *jihād*. All right-thinking Muslims consider these acts as cruel and completely un-Islamic. In the Qur'ān, the concept of *jihād* has nothing to do with violence and it is not used in the sense of war. The word *jihād* is derived from the root *jahada* meaning to endeavor, to strive, to labor, to exert oneself. The word *ijtihād* (effort, exertion), derived from the same root, means making efforts to re-interpret and apply Islamic doctrine to new situations. In the majority of cases, in the Qur'ān, the term *mujāhid* (from the same root as *jihād*) refers to someone who strives in the way of Allāh. The Qur'ān has another word for war (*qitāl*).

There seems to be no agreement among scholars on one definition of terrorism. The numerous debates about this question show the complexity of the topic. Here is one definition:

> "Terrorism has been defined as the use of violence or threat to sow panic in society, to weaken or topple the authorities and encourage political change. It is similar, in some cases to the *guerrillas*; although unlike the guerrilleros, terrorists are often unable to seize territories or unwilling to do so. Sometimes it replaces the war between States. In all times, terrorism manifested itself in many forms and today's society is in fact facing a multiform terrorism." (Laqueur)

We notice that terrorists do not respect established rules of warfare; they use violence (or a threat) for political impact, plan and calculate their act in order "to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target." (Shughart) Two types of terrorism exist: domestic terrorism which remains inside one country, and transnational terrorism. "When, however, a terrorist incident in one country involves victims, targets, institutions, or citizens of another country, terrorism assumes a transnational character. The hijackings on 9/11 are transnational terrorist events for a number of reasons: the incidents were planned abroad; the terrorists came from outside of the United States; support came from abroad; victims were from over 80 countries; and the incidents had economic and security implications worldwide." (Enders and Sandler, 2004)

Who are the terrorists? What are their motives? What madness drives these young people who were educated in a Western university to become thugs, in violation of the duty of recognition and respect for the society where they lived? The revolt of these young people can be explained by their exclusion from society and their lack of career prospects, leaving

no other choice than unemployment or trafficking. These causes of despair, thus of revolt, do not explain terrorism. And there are young people from families with a high standard of living, sometimes with a good level of education, who became terrorists, as in the case of Muhammad Atta, the leader of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Bin Laden, educated, rich and from a wealthy family.

It is also an inversion of moral values that explains the attitude of Arab terrorists, including many young men and sometime women who are ready to become suicide bombers to kill other people, even often other Muslims like themselves. The denial of reality can come from many other causes than envy. In fact, it can come from any comparison made by man between what he perceives and what he would like to happen, i.e. between reality and the ideal. Some Muslims transformed themselves into suicide bombers simply because there is no hope for a better future in their country. The Palestinians have lived since the birth of Israel in refugee camps or under Israeli occupation with a future ahead of them without hope, high unemployment and widespread poverty; these difficult and unbearable conditions are increasing their resentment. Although suicide is forbidden in Islam, several Palestinian militants see it as a sacrifice of oneself for the Liberation of Palestine.

The Islamists are by definition fundamentalists *unfamiliar with the basic principles of their religion*. They have a literal reading of the Qur'ān and religious laws not adapted to the present conditions of the society they live in. We must therefore avoid any confusion, any temptation to accuse or suspect Muslims of being Islamists. It should also be remembered that all Muslim leaders have repeatedly condemned Islamist terrorism. In fact the terrorists are a minority in the Muslim World (less than 5%). The vast majority of Muslims reject any interpretation of the Qur'ān that advocates violence against innocents, even if they are infidels. Islam is considered as a religion of peace and charity. The majority of Muslims reject suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians as a method of defending Islam. The only place where terrorism is regarded as justified by a majority of Muslims is the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank under Palestinian authority. There is a massive and growing rejection of terrorism in the Muslim world. Most Muslims have come to understand that it did not resolve any problems, that it brought only misfortune, to terrorists as well as to their victims.

Many Islamist militants are highly educated and have not sworn allegiance to any particular organization, which greatly complicates identification and verification of their

antecedents. Sunnī terrorists such as Ramzi Yusuf, who was convicted of the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York (in 1993), are generally representative of this trend. Terrorists are often Muslim *mujāhidīn*, supporters of *jihād*, who have gained combat experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia or Chechnya. Having received a solid training in weapons, explosives and communications equipment, they know the value of the Internet, fax machines, cell phones and other kinds of technology. Increasingly informed and willing to travel, they have access to excellent false documents and international contacts and can easily blend into the local emigrant community, in which they can plan and carry out attacks without being easily identified. If they pose a threat, it is largely because of their obscure and unstructured behavior combined with the ardor of their devotion. Usama bin Laden is an extraordinary example of this type of terrorist; his immense wealth, his personal abilities and charisma make him much more dangerous.

Usama Bin Laden was born in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia in 1957; he is the seventeenth in a family of fifty-two children. His father, Muhammad Bin Laden, left Yaman to work in Saudi Arabia as a laborer and later founded a construction company. Usama was therefore raised in Saudi Arabia; his world view was influenced by the Wahhābī interpretation of Islam and by revolutionary movements that had begun to spread in the 70s. Dr. Muhammad Qutb, a renowned activist, taught Usama. He was the brother of Sayyid Qutb, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, who was executed in 1966 under Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāsir (Nasser). Sayyid Qutb is recognized as the father of an activist *jihād* that had a major influence on radical political movements.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Bin Laden immediately joined the movement of anti-Soviet *jihād*. His activities were appreciated by both the United States and Saudi Arabia; both countries supported *jihād* against the Soviet Union. Students (Tālibān), who had lived as refugees in Pakistan, managed to seize Afghanistan with the help of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in 1998. They quickly imposed their outdated and erroneous vision of Islam, where women were banned from schools and the Shīʿī minority persecuted. It was in this context that Bin Laden found sanctuary in Afghanistan to expand his activities, because he was appreciated by the Tālibān leader, Mullā Muhammad ʿUmar. He justified the political act of 9/11 by saying that America and its allies massacred Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir and ʿIraq, therefore Muslims had the legitimate right to attack America. The event of 9/11 was meant to target mainly the economic and military emblems of America. Bin

Laden has claimed that the Americans who elect their President are responsible for the Israeli oppression of Palestinians, as their government manufactures weapons that Israel uses to kill Palestinians. He has invited the Americans to revolt against their government as they did during the Vietnam War, in order to stop the massacre of Muslims. According to Bin Laden, Muslims have the right to defend themselves because they are subject to killings, destruction and atrocities.

Sometimes in extreme conditions like those found in Palestine a woman accepts to become a suicide bomber because there is no hope for a better future. There are very few cases of woman participating in violent activities. There are still many sectors of activities where women are under-represented. For instance, Qur'ānic scholarship is really the domain of men; the contribution of women, when it does occur, is usually ignored. This is generally the case in all religions of the world, in which women play such a key part; yet, when it comes to positions of religious authority, they remain on the periphery.

Women in Islam

The Qur'ān (VII: 19-23), contrary to the Bible, places equal blame on Adam and Eve for their mistake. It does not mention that Eve tempted Adam to eat from the tree or that she had eaten before him. Eve, in the Qur'ān, is not presented as a seductress. Both Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan and committed a sin. Then they asked God for forgiveness and He forgave them. Contrary to the Christian view, there is no concept of original sin in Islam; every man is responsible of his owns actions, therefore the children of Adam do not inherit the sin committed by Adam and Eve. In Islam, all babies are born without sin.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, Arabs used to kill baby girls at birth. In this society, which was based on physical strength and power, females were considered to be a burden on the family. The Qur'ān severely condemned this murder (XVI: 59). In order to encourage Arabs to keep their baby girls, Prophet Muhammad promised salvation to those who were blessed with daughters if they would bring them up compassionately: "He who is involved in bringing up daughters, and accords benevolent treatment towards them, they will be protection for him against Hell-Fire." "Whoever maintains two girls till they attain maturity, he and I will come on the Resurrection Day like this; and he joined his fingers."

If we look at the Jewish world, the Rabbis considered women as not being able to bear witness because Eve was considered to be mainly responsible for the fall. Even today,

women in Israel are not allowed to give evidence in rabbinical courts. The Rabbis based their judgment that women are unreliable to bear witness on Genesis 18:9-16, where it is related that Sara, Abraham's wife, had lied. In the Christian West, both ecclesiastical and civil law prohibited women from giving testimony until late in the XXth century. It is true that the Qur'ān, revealed 1400 years ago, instructed Muslims dealing in financial transactions to get two male witnesses or one male and two females (II: 282). In order to understand this verse we have to go back to the context of the time. Traditionally, it was men who usually did all the calculation regarding financial transactions, because women were not used to counting. However, the Qur'ān in other situations accepts the testimony of a woman as equal to that of a man. For example if a man accuses his wife of adultery, he is required by the Qur'ān to solemnly swear five times as evidence of the wife's fault. If the wife denies and swears similarly five times, she is not considered culpable and in either case the marriage is dissolved (XXIV: 6-11).

The Qur'ān aimed at helping the weaker members of the community: the poor, the orphans, women, slaves, and the aged... Polygamy was a common pre-Islamic practice. At that time, there were many wars and, as a consequence, there were more women than men and many orphans, so polygamy was tolerated. The Qur'ān (III: 2) accuses many guardians of orphans of being fraudulent with the orphans' property. It then says that since guardians do not deal honestly with orphaned women's properties, then they may marry them, up to four, provided they can do justice among them. The Qur'ān says: "If you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, then marry from among [orphaned] women such as you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear you will not be fair [to your wives], then [marry] only one; that is the safest course" (III: 3). As Fazlur Rahman explained: this shows that this question arose within the particular context of orphan girls; but the Qur'ān also states: "You shall never be able to do justice among women, no matter how much you desire to do so" (4: 129).

Is polygamy permitted in the Qur'ān? There is certainly a contradiction between permission for polygamy up to four wives and the requirement of justice among wives with the unambiguous declaration that such justice is, in fact, impossible. The traditionalist Muslims interpret that the man has the right to take four wives while the demand for justice is left to his conscience. The weakness of this position is that it relies on the conscience of the husband, even though it is certain that justice will be infringed. Muslim modernists, in contrast, tend to give more importance to the demand for justice and say that permission for

polygamy was meant to be only temporary and for a limited purpose. The Qur'ān left room for interpretation, since polygamy could not be removed in one stroke. It tolerated polygamy but was inciting Muslims to move toward monogamy. The Qur'ān adopted a similar position regarding slavery. It accepted slavery since it was impossible to legislate it away at one stroke, but encouraged liberation of slaves (XC: 13; VIII: 89; LVIII: 3). (Rahman, 47-48)

If we read this verse it seems that the Qur'ān favors men: "And for women there are rights [over against men] commensurate with the duties [they owe men] but men are one degree higher" (II: 228). In this verse the Qur'ān refers to a division of labor and a difference in functions. We are told that "Men are in charge of women because God have given some bounty over others and because men have the liability of expenditure [on women]" (VI: 36). But we should not read these verses in isolation from other verses of the Qur'ān where women excel over men. Women have received other bounties distinct from those of men. The Qur'ān in several places puts special emphasis on the mother's great role in giving birth and nursing (XXXI: 14). These verses show that men have superiority over women in the material life if they take them in charged. If a woman becomes economically sufficient, and contributes to the household expenditure, there would be no superiority ascribed to man, since as a human being; he has no superiority over his wife. The inequality between a man and a woman in the material life does not affect their spiritual status in front of God, since the material life is only temporal. When a man dies he cannot bring his house or his business with him.

In its laws of inheritance (see IV: 7-12, 176), the Qur'ān laid down the share of a daughter at half of the share of a son. We have to remember that the Qur'ān was revealed 1400 ago; its prescriptions fitted perfectly the context of that time. Some Muslim modernists think that because the society of today is completely different, the daughter should get an equal share with her brother. Those who oppose change argue that since the daughter, when she marries, also gets a dowry from her husband, the apparent inequity in inheritance shares means a real equality. For Muslim modernists, the question must evidently be studied further in the light of the present modern context.

Islam encouraged every Muslim to get married and have children. Marriage enables humans to fulfill their potential due to the different and complementary nature of man and woman and the challenge of raising a family while maintaining a harmonious relationship. A good marriage improves humans because it is founded on natural feelings of "love and

mercy" (XXX: 21) and man and woman learn from each other due to their different outlook on life. "They are garments unto you and you are garments unto them." (II: 187)

As in the ten commandments of Moses, the Qur'ān places the importance of kindness to parents as second only to worshipping God. "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents." (17:23) The foundation of Muslim society relies greatly on women who as mothers raise and impart Islamic values to the children. A prophetic *hadīth* recognizes the essential role of the mother: "A man asked the Prophet: 'Whom should I honor most?' The Prophet replied: 'Your mother.' 'And who comes next?' asked the man. The Prophet replied: 'Your mother.' 'And who comes next?' asked the man. The Prophet replied: 'Your mother.' 'And who comes next?' asked the man. The Prophet replied: 'Your father.'" The Prophet also said: "Paradise lies at the feet of the mother."

In the Qur'ān, there is a sense of a certain inner justice that every human (no matter the race or sex) will be judged according to his or her real spiritual worth and value. The Qur'ān affirms clearly that any human (either male or female) who does good deeds will be rewarded (XXXIII: 35). "And their Lord answered them: Truly I will never cause to be lost the work of any of you, be you a male or female, you are members one of another" (3:195). The only distinction that God makes between humans is based on piety and good acts. "O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-Aware" (XLIX: 13). The Fear of God is called *Taqwā* in Arabic. The root of *Taqwā* is *waqā* which means "to guard or protect against something." The Fear of God is an attitude of gratitude and respect. It involves caution and prudence in the sense that a believer does not want to displease God in all his actions. The term *taqiyya* is derived from the same root which means to dissimulate one's faith in period of danger. (As Jesus said you should not throw pearls before swine; they are unable to appreciate them.) In fact from this verse we may conclude that all races and sexes are equal in the eyes of God. Actually no one can judge any human being because only God knows his or her real value.

The position of women in Islam might seem frightening by our XXIst century standards. Nevertheless, it has to be viewed within the proper historical context. The Qur'ān was revealed 1400 years ago. There is no doubt that, at that time, this revelation greatly improved the living conditions of women. Any objective assessment of the position of

women in Islam has to take into account the historical circumstances in which this tradition developed. At the beginning of Islam, the views of Muslim men regarding women were influenced by the prevalent attitudes towards women in their societies. The Qur'ān mainly distinguishes between three types of women: the slave, the free women and the women who voluntarily try to attract men with their beauty. Of course, during that time, slaves did not have the same rights as free people. When Muslims interpret the Qur'ān, they cannot generalize one particular verse to all women; they have to go back to the context of the time.

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Education in several Muslim countries serves first and foremost to learn to read the Qur'ān, enough to be able to recite most of the chapters by heart. In the Muslim mind, this instruction predisposes the individual to accept without question the text of the Holy Book, including its contradictions, which are common, because this Divine revelation must not be submitted to the review of our limited human logic. Since medieval times, Muslim grammarians have been very conservative; they wanted to preserve the original beauty of Arabic, the language of the Qur'ān, therefore they have only allowed very few changes. They have been reluctant to permit the creation of neologisms and to allow the Arabic language to become flexible enough to evolve with scientific knowledge, sociological studies, etc. Learning based on the Qur'ān, and memorization of the text without discussion and critical thinking, led to an intellectual laziness. We know in fact that the development of thought cannot function without words and expressions, a language which does not contain certain words — or prohibits certain association of words — makes it difficult to create some new concepts. This explains the difficulty in translating sociological and medical works, for example, into Arabic and the extremely small number of translations of Western texts available to Arab intellectuals. This is probably one reason for the extremely small number of scientists in the Arab world at the present time.

Muslim modernists have often examined the causes of Islamic decay and proposed solutions. Al-Afghānī believed that the central problem of Muslims came from the fact that Muslims did not understand their religion properly and did not live in accordance with its teachings. He knew that the political and economic successes of Europe were due to knowledge and its appropriate application, and that the flaws of the Muslim world were due

to ignorance. Therefore, according to him, Muslims must learn the useful knowledge of Europe. In his view, Muslims should give more importance to the practice of Islamic values (such as treating all Muslims as their brothers) instead of focusing on differences of doctrine and traditions. Islam needed a Luther; once this reformation would occur, Islam would be as able as any other religion to play its essential role of a moral guide. When societies follow the principles of Islam, they become powerful; when they defy Islamic laws, they become weak. Islam encourages the solidarity and mutual responsibility necessary for the strength of nations.

For Muhammad 'Abduh, the ideal modern Muslim society could not be achieved by a return to the past and by stopping the process of change. It could only be realized by acknowledging the need for change, and by connecting that change to the principles of Islam. Islam should serve both as a principle of change and a beneficial control over it. Muslims needed to create an elite of *'ulamā'* who would be able to correctly interpret the Qur'ān and to teach the true Islam and so provide the base for a firm and progressive society. The most important goal was to know what Islam really was and how it could be applied in a beneficial way in modern society. The key to all of 'Abduh's thought was making a distinction between what was essential in Islam and what was inessential. To understand the true Islam and practice it in their lives, Muslims needed both reason and revelation.

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