

LIBERATION SPIRITUALITY AS A SIGNAL OF TRANSCENDENCE: CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction

Mystical experience of the divine may not be accessible to everybody, but there are other phenomena, accessible to all human beings, which Peter L. Berger calls “signals of transcendence”. Together with Berger I believe that in the “marginal situations” of human life – in the extreme experiences of oppression and injustice, hunger and death – signals of transcendence are to be found in death-defying hope, the hope of transforming the world for human betterment together with acts of courage and self-sacrifice. “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees, takes off his shoes, the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.”¹ It is possible for human beings to ignore this God, the fire that burns incessantly in our hearts crying out for justice, and live impoverished lives. But it is also possible to step outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life and be open to the mystery that surrounds us on all sides.²

The greatest feminist of Bengali history, a Muslim woman, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), was able to regain a metaphysical dimension to her everyday reality and pronounce a powerful “no” to dehumanisation and death of innocent women. As she burned for justice for women, she realised that she was thirsty for God. She wrote:

This is it. At last I understand why my heart burns incessantly, why it is ceaselessly aggrieved. The heart’s thirst is not the trivial thirst for water. This is the eternal thirst for love. God alone is longed for, and everyone is thirsty – desired is the love of the Loving One.³

The life and work of Begum Rokeya showed the signs of revolutionary hope – signals of transcendence. In today’s Bangladesh some women in the “marginal situations” of human life are stepping outside their harsh reality to see the world as “charged with the grandeur of God”.⁴

Begum Rokeya wrote: “What we learn from looking at our own and others’ situation and reflecting on them is the real religious learning.”⁵ For centuries people have learned their religion mainly from their leaders, their scriptures, other religious books and from mystical experiences. Exasperated by the innocent suffering of women in the name of religion, Begum Rokeya urged her people to experience deeply their own and others’ situations and know religion in a different way. Chung Hyun Kyung, a contemporary Asian feminist claims that “If we do not permit ourselves to experience fully who we are, we will not have the power to fight back and create our own space. We have to touch something really real among and around us in order to meet God”.⁶ Today’s Bangladeshi women, sufferers of both internal and external injustices, are asking anew the eternal questions, “Who am I?” and “Who is my God?” However, they do not ask these questions in an individualistic western way: “... their sense of and responsibility for extended kin, their respect for ... ancestors, their palpable sense of being part of a much larger community, and that includes a closeness with and reverence for all forms of life on earth”,⁷ make women in Bangladesh

fully experience their life in community. Contemplating social injustices, they raise questions about religions and God and as a result new women's liberation spiritualities emerge in Bangladesh.

Christians and Muslims: People of the Book

In Bangladesh more than 85% of the population are Muslim and 0.3% are Christian. I, an Indian Bengali Christian, married an English clergyman, and lived in Bangladesh from 1981 to 1992. Out of these 11 years in Bangladesh, 4½ were spent in church premises and 6½ years in the rented flats of Muslim households. There the innocent suffering of fellow human beings, especially women, struck me so profoundly that I had no choice but to experience life at a very deep level. The experience led me directly to the questions about God. Soon I found that I was not the only one asking questions about me and my God, but groups of women were doing just the same, or were very eager to raise those questions.

In my status as a clergy wife I had Christian women coming to talk with me, often about personal matters. Living in Muslim houses gave me opportunities to make friends with Muslim women as well. In many different ways I encountered people from various backgrounds. Being with each other is very much a part of everyday life in Bengal where one's personal life and faith are not taboo subjects. One of the first things some Muslim women said to me was, "You and I are 'People of the Book'". Before going to Bangladesh I was not consciously aware that as Christians and Muslims we belong together. Such sayings made me appreciate that Christians and Muslims have much in common and encouraged me to listen to the questions Muslim women were raising about life and God.

The Qur'an frequently refers to the Jews and Christians as the "People of the Book", because they possess divine books of revelation: Tawrat (Torah), Zabur (Psalms) and Injil (Gospel). The Qur'an says:

"O People of the Book! ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord"... Those who believe [in the Qur'an], those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], and the Sabians and the Christians, – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, – on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve (5.71-72).

According to some Bangladeshi Muslim women I met, such qur'anic verses point to the unity between the Jews, Christians and Muslims emphasising the common source of their religions, the similarities and points of convergence in their scriptures. They understand that according to the Qur'an these three groups are the "People of the Book". I use the phrase "People of the Book" with the aim of affirming the same belief. It is my view that one of the main points of convergence is the issue of social justice

Issues of Social Justice

With this view I listened to the sufferings of women beggars who came to my door regularly and to the stories of our own "home helps", mainly Muslim women, who worked in our house for various periods. I read the local newspapers which carried accounts of atrocities done to women just because of their femaleness. At the same time I was aware of the resilience of poor women who would fight against the odds to survive and keep their children alive. I was invited either as a participant or a speaker to various women's gatherings where women's situation and ways of improving that situation were discussed and analysed. I found these women searching for ways to make life better for each other and dedicated to that task. As a middle-class Christian woman in dialogue with the poor and

with Muslim women, I observed the emerging liberative consciousness of Bangladeshi women. As a Bengali woman myself I participated in their meetings, rallies and workshops and became involved with women's struggle for justice and full humanity in that country.

The ground was prepared and in 1988 with other Christian women I founded, and for four years directed, *Netritto Proshikkhon Kendro* (NPK), Leadership Training Centre. The work of this women's ecumenical training centre is designed to raise awareness among women of their own situation and to enable them to find resources within the scriptures that can inspire them in the struggle against injustice. The most important part of NPK's work is its theological workshops. Women bring to NPK workshops their everyday experience of life in a society where Muslims and Christians live side by side.

In the NPK workshops I was very much a part of the process through which a Bangladeshi Christian women's theology developed. NPK started in Dhaka but its activities were not restricted to the Christian women in the capital city. When NPK invited men and women from different parts of Bangladesh or when, as an NPK director, I was invited to run workshops, I came into contact with women and men, rich and poor, educated and uneducated people, Christians and others from many parts of Bangladesh. NPK also invited Muslim activists to be in dialogue about distinctive hermeneutical methodologies in order to facilitate co-operation for the common goal of women's emancipation. I was actively involved with all this work of NPK. The data collected in these gatherings is the major source of information for this paper.

Bangladeshi Feminism

It was comparatively easy to collect evidence of Christian women's work, as my research focused on NPK, but there is no single comparable institution for Muslim women. Reclaiming their scripture and tradition is part of the everyday work of women lawyers and barristers, women working in development and aid agencies, human rights workers, columnists and writers. They quote neglected verses of the Qur'an and *Hadith* and put the well-used and abused verses in their context. Many feminists in Bangladesh have given expression in poetry to the anguish of women and their aspirations for their liberation. *Karan Tumi Nari*, by Zeenat Ahmed, given below in my own translation, encapsulates in literary form the experience of womanhood which I observed and shared during my 11 years in Bangladesh:

For You are a Woman
Woman,
the cry with which at your birth you proclaim,
"Here I am",
that cry today fills people with fear,
for you are a woman.
You will grow a little, learn to walk and run,
be everybody's darling,
and from that moment you are no more secure
for you are a woman.
Grown up, you will go to school and college.
Your mother stands waiting at the door:
who knows if you will return unharmed
for you are a woman.
When they see you, boys will whistle.
One throws stones,
another acid;
you are never safe
for you are a woman.

Once married, your husband's puppet,
to play as he pleases,
Your own desires will never come first:
but when there is blame to bear
it will fall on you only –
the slightest thing a ground for divorce
for you are a woman.
So beware!
Do not be so helpless
that your mouth stays shut.
Be the voice of protest;
take for yourselves the rights that are yours.
Not just as a woman are you to live
But as a full human being.⁸

Women's liberation movements, devoid of party political ambitions, act as political pressure groups to cause the people in power to protect the rights of women and of marginalised people. Women from all walks of life organise themselves and protest against atrocities committed against women in family and society. Through their writings the educated challenge injustice with the aim of changing attitudes and world-views that are detrimental to the powerless. The domination of the powerful and the male is no more the accepted norm. A procession of women protesters on the roads of Bangladesh is almost an everyday sight.

As they challenge power structures, both national and international, women find that religion, as it is practised, is one of the main obstacles to women's liberation. A worker in a non-governmental organisation said to me that in the rural areas of Bangladesh she finds that, "even today, the concept of equality in marriage is considered to be almost a blasphemy. Women are severely criticised for any aspiration to independence or equality."⁹ The traditional majority response to such a religious stand has so far been one of acceptance without any question. Now that women are campaigning for liberation, they can no longer tolerate a religious position that is so totally opposed to gender justice.

Institutional Religion and Oppression

As long as women in Bangladesh were reading their scriptures through the eyes of their religious leaders (almost always male), they were unaware of the discrepancy between the fundamental tenets of their religious belief and its different practices, and of the diverse ways of observing any particular religion, and therefore they acquiesced to the norms prescribed by their leaders. They were content with their religions as practised in their culture. Now, as they look at their own and others' situation and reflect on them, they become conscious of the misuse of religion against women; they understand that their religions have become institutionalised and harmful for the powerless. I now discuss briefly the process through which religions become institutionalised and harmful for women, and why their adherents accept social injustices as God's ordinance or leave them unchallenged.

Sociologists point out four major inter-related contributory systems that are present whenever religion as a fully developed phenomenon is found: an intellectual system of beliefs (theology), a cultic system of rites and ceremonies, an organizational system of social interaction and an ethical system.¹⁰

In short, these four contributory systems are creed, cult, community and norm. Theology, creed or belief systems originate around the experience of the sacred. Beliefs are kept alive

by the cultic system of regular rites and rituals which bring the adherents together, building a community of believers. This social group also has a norm or ethical system legitimised by reference to a non-empirical reality.

The community selects or elects leaders – usually men in patriarchal societies – to study and interpret the scriptures to the community and to perform rituals. Thus the religion becomes institutionalised with a dominant group of leaders who often, instead of assisting the believers, attempt to control them. The faith of the community is turned into doctrines and dogmas by institutional religion. In order to strengthen its power, the religious authority puts undue emphasis on cult and dogma and thus obscures the real purpose of a religion. The observation of rites and rituals becomes the primary reason for the existence of a religion, and its ethical system or norm is neglected. Religion becomes other-worldly and only concerned with spiritual things such as God, the soul, and eternal life. Because of its rootlessness, such a religion has very little impact on people's lives and as a result starts to die out. People refuse to abide by such a meaningless religion and the number of atheists increases. Perhaps this other-worldliness of religion has contributed towards the rise of atheism in the West.

In the East, including Bangladesh, in order to stop the increase of atheism there is a desperate attempt by religious leaders to relate religion to everyday life. The leaders reintroduce an ethical norm for the followers. But interestingly, as a result of such prescriptions of ethical norms by the religious authorities, injustice against the powerless, especially women, is often perpetuated. When women in Bangladesh reflect on this experience of injustice done to innocent people, they naturally ask questions about God. If these religious prescriptions are God-given injunctions, then God must be unjust. If God is indeed unjust, women argue, then it is dangerous to worship such a God. In the beginning of this century, the Bengali Muslim feminist, Begum Rokeya (mentioned above), also cried out like the Bangladeshi women of today:

Not a tear, not a heart-throb of one pure woman wronged shall escape the eyes of Eternal Justice, or fail to bring punishment upon the wrong-doer! This we may believe – this we must believe – else God Himself would be a demon and the world His Hell!¹¹

Bangladeshi women, who refuse to believe in an unjust God, suspect that the prescribed norm is derived from dogma rather than from the original faith. In a conversation with me, a woman drew this distinction between faith and dogma, saying “for one's faith one is willing to die but for one's dogma one is willing to kill”. Women in Bangladesh observe a rise of fanaticism which is capable of killing women who aspire to establish justice. In recent years, threatened by the unleashing of feminine power, *shakti*, the fanatics have pronounced *fatwas* against women. The instigators of such extreme measures are widely referred to as fundamentalists. However, many in Bangladesh object to the use of the term “fundamentalist” to denote such people, preferring to call them “extremist” or “fanatic”.

These Bangladeshis argue that violent and irrational behaviour in the name of religion by its adherents is a global phenomenon. Such people often serve the interests of the establishment rather than that of the powerless sections of the society. In fact, the weaker sections such as minority communities and women become the targets of their oppression. They support the *status quo*, obstruct social and political changes and manipulate religion in order to control others and retain power. If these activities are thought to be the outcome of a genuine following of the fundamental beliefs of a religion (as the word fundamentalism implies), then that religion is severely insulted. The misuse of such a term gives too much credit to the fanatics at the expense of the religion. Soon religion and fanaticism, faith and dogma, are understood to be one and the same, so that all religious people are seen as

irrational and primitive. I too prefer to use the terms fanatics or extremists, avoiding the term fundamentalist, because of the misunderstandings attached to it.

Women in Bangladesh experience their religions in this confused state in which many adherents are far removed from the original vision of their religious founders: extremist actions are mistakenly seen as the fundamental expression of the faith. Although fanatical activities in Bangladesh make the headlines in the media, the extremists are very few in number. However, even if one woman is killed as a result of religious bigotry, fanaticism is rightly seen as a serious phenomenon in Bangladesh. Moreover, the predominantly conservative religious attitude towards women is the ground on which fanaticism against women flourishes. Women's liberation groups radically oppose such reactionary views. When justice for women and religion are viewed as two entirely opposite poles, religious women dedicated to the issues of justice have no other options than to review their religions.

The Prophetic Function of Women

There is a global awareness that fanaticism is flourishing everywhere and in every religion. However, the other phenomenon, the prophetic dimension of religion, although somewhat discreet, is also on the increase.

Religion ... has the prophetic function, providing a catalyst or challenge to bring about change and improvement in society... Religious leaders, not necessarily the institutionally accepted ones and therefore called prophets, can play an important role here. Institutionalization often brings with it a loss of the original vision of the religious founders and so, the re-introduction of the charismatic element becomes necessary.¹²

In the face of rapid westernisation and modernisation, institutional religion reclaims dogma and perpetuates injustice, whereas some feminists reclaim the original vision of their religious founders as a measure to bring about justice in their society. It can be claimed that the religious feminists in Bangladesh are fulfilling this prophetic role. Riffat Hassan, a scholar of Pakistani origin, says: "In Islam we have a saying, 'Whenever there is a Pharaoh, there is a Moses'. So whenever there is repression there is rebellion and this rebellion can be creative."¹³ Her observation seems to prove itself right in Bangladesh. Many Muslim and Christian women's prophetic work in Bangladesh is to challenge the "Pharaoh" of today in the name of God.

The Pharaoh from whom today's Bangladeshi Muslim and Christian women seek liberation is their male-dominated society. Like Moses, women know that the cries of the oppressed reach God and, like Moses, they know they have a responsibility to bring people out of oppression. The misinterpretations of their scriptures are the shackles by which today's Pharaoh binds women in slavery. To untie these fetters, women look deep into their scriptures to find resources that empower them in their work of liberation. Both Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh learn a new technique of reading their scriptures, not from the perspective of their male religious leaders, but from the perspective of powerless women, sufferers of injustice.

When they re-read their scriptures, both Christian and Muslim women find the concept of social justice central to their texts. They urge people to read their texts in the light of this central theme, social justice. Women argue that, if the scriptures truly originated in order to encourage oppression of fellow human beings, they must be discarded without delay. On the other hand, if the purpose of these scriptures was to establish justice and peace in society, then the scriptures will now have to be read in the light of the theme of social

justice. They notice that most people have forgotten what their scriptures originally stood for. As a result of the experience of suffering – not for what they have done but simply for who they are – both Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh re-read their scriptures. First I will give some examples of Muslim and then of Christian women’s scriptural work for liberation and justice.

Muslim Women Re-Read Their Scripture

When injustices to women are legitimised by the quotation of texts from various Islamic books without any reference, Muslim women in Bangladesh re-emphasise the centrality of the Qur’an. Secondly, they learn to read their texts in the contemporary context as well as in the historical context. Thirdly, they highlight the quintessence of Islam (justice) and challenge unjust practices. Bangladeshi Muslim women recognise that it is not Islam itself, but rather a certain use of Islam, that legitimises the subjugation of women. For example, Muslim leaders may argue that, according to Islam, at creation the woman was taken from the man, that she was the first to sin and therefore women are inferior and morally deficient. In order to find the roots of such beliefs women read the Qur’an, to find that there is no injustice in the way human beings were created. The Qur’an says:

O mankind! reverence your guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; – reverence God through whom ye demand your mutual [rights], and [reverence] the wombs [that bore you]: for God ever watches over you (4.1).

They read the Qur’an through to find that, according to the Qur’an, at creation no superiority or priority is accorded either to the female or the male – both are created from a single soul, independently.¹⁴ Moreover, in the Qur’an, woman is not blamed for the first sin. Both the man and the woman listened to the whisper of Satan, ate the fruit, repented and were sent out of the garden together.¹⁵

If the Qur’an does not have any verses to support a Muslim belief that the first woman was created inferior and was morally deficient, what is the origin of such beliefs? The origin is the *Hadith*. According to a verse from the *Hadith*, Prophet Muhammad said: “... and but for Eve, wives would never betray their husbands”. Another verse from the *Hadith* reads: “Allah’s Apostle said, ‘Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib...’.”¹⁶ Because of the existence of such *Hadith* texts, it becomes a Muslim feminist’s responsibility to work out whether a Muslim must abide by the Qur’an rather than the *Hadith*. Indeed, Muslim feminists everywhere, including Bangladesh, are reviewing the importance of *Hadith* in Islam.

Hadith, in Arabic narrative, is Muslim tradition – accounts of the words and deeds of Muhammad during the period of his preaching. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, writes: “Once they were recorded in a collection, the *Hadith* constituted the *Sunna*, the teaching of Muhammad”. The *Hadith* shows the believers the right way which was followed by the Prophet. To follow that path is to gain worthy life on earth and paradise after death.¹⁷ Therefore *Hadith* is extremely important for the Muslims. Riffat Hassan, mentioned above, observes:

The majority of the Muslims in the world, ... though they acknowledge the Qur’an to be the basic document on which Islam is founded, are influenced much more by what is contained in the *Hadith* literature and the Shariah than they are by the Qur’an. This is not surprising since the Qur’an is generally understood in the light of the commentaries (*tafsirs*), which are themselves based upon *Hadith* literature or the explanations of the jurists (*fuqaha*), whose main source of information is also the *Hadith* literature.¹⁸

Muslims in Bangladesh are also influenced by the Qur'an and the *Hadith*. However, following the *Hadith* is not a simple task, as the collection of *Hadith* is vast, with many false *Hadith* in circulation. "Some *hadith* do not necessarily date back to the time of Muhammad but reflect the thinking of the community, while there were some *hadith* constructed for political ends."¹⁹ Although some *hadith* were constructed for political ends and cannot be regarded as reliable historical accounts of the tradition of the Prophet, together with the authentic *hadith* they continue to be in circulation in Muslim societies. For many Bangladeshis it is well nigh impossible to know the difference between authentic and inauthentic *hadith*, and therefore abuse of *hadith* against women is rampant in Bangladesh. Regarding the most authentic *Hadith* collection, written by Al-Bukhari, Mernissi claims:

If at the time of al-Bukhari – that is, less than two centuries after the death of the Prophet – there were already 596,725 false Hadith in circulation ... it is easy to imagine how many there are today. The most astonishing thing is that the skepticism that guided the work of the founders of religious scholarship has disappeared today.²⁰

Because of the existing confusion regarding the *Hadith*, Muslim women in Bangladesh put renewed emphasis on the Qur'an. They measure the genuineness of a *hadith* (a saying) against the Qur'an. If any teaching from the *Hadith* goes against that of the Qur'an, then the question of authenticity can be raised. The Qur'an says: "Do they not consider the Qur'an [with care]? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy" (4.82). Therefore women argue that discrepancy is not from God and if a particular verse from the *Hadith* goes against the very teaching of the Qur'an then that should be attributed to the fallibility of the human authors of the *Hadith*. In so far as there is no discrepancy, the teachings of the *Hadith* are as revered as that of the Qur'an. Strict adherence to the words of the Qur'an is of course a fundamental principle of all Muslims. Therefore, Muslim feminists of today are not innovating anything by redirecting the vision of the Muslims towards the centrality of the Qur'an. Like Bangladeshi women, Riffat Hassan argues:

... I define Islam strictly in terms of what is contained in the Qur'an. I do so because the centrality of the Qur'an to the Islamic world view and belief system is undisputed. Also, in view of the Muslim belief that the Qur'an is the Word of Allah conveyed through the agency of the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad and transmitted by him without any error or changes to those who heard him, the degree of authority possessed by the Qur'an is "absolute", whereas the authority of the other sources are "relative" – at least theoretically.²¹

Gender Equality

The words of the Qur'an give Bangladeshi women great strength to fight for gender justice. Women are empowered by many qur'anic verses, such as the following, which give equal authority to both men and women:

The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoy what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practise regular charity, and obey God and his Apostle. On them will God pour his mercy: for God is exalted in power. (9.71)

The Qur'an gives a picture of the reciprocal nature of the husband-wife relationship: "They are your garments and ye are their garments" (2.187). The commentator adds: "Men and women are each other's garments: they are for mutual support, mutual comfort and mutual protection, fitting into each other as a garment fits the body."²² Women in Bangladesh claim that, if men and women were not equal, a metaphor of garments would not be accurate as the garment would be either too loose or too tight. The Qur'an goes on to say: "And among his signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and he has put love and mercy between your [hearts]: verily in that are signs for those who reflect." (30.21)

It is not difficult for Bangladeshi women to cite many verses from the Qur'an to support the argument that the man-woman relationship is to be reciprocal and not one of domination and subjugation. However, in a male-dominated Bangladesh, the qur'anic verses that would encourage a reciprocal relationship between the male and the female are not the ones frequently quoted, but rather those which may suggest that women should be kept in subjugation. In Bangladesh many Muslim men see themselves as the lords and masters of their women; as a consequence there is conflict and discord in relationships between men and women and particular distress for the women. Women's subordination is the reality in many Muslim countries, including Bangladesh. There are one or two odd qur'anic verses that are well known in Bangladesh, as they are proclaimed as **the** verses which legitimise the divinely ordained low status of women. An example is given here to show how women deal with such verses as *Sura 2.228*. The last part of this *aya* (verse), torn out of its context, is often cited to justify male domination over women: "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree [of advantage] over them. And God is exalted in power, wise."

Women argue that each verse must be read in its context. Reading a text out of its textual context is a method of interpretation which women challenge as misleading and faulty. Re-reading this verse in its context clarifies women's argument. The context of this utterance concerns legal provision for divorce. The point of the text becomes clearer when the whole verse is read together:

Women, on being divorced, must let three menstrual periods pass without cohabiting. It is not lawful for them to conceal what God may have brought about in their wombs, – if they believe in God and in the last day. During this interlude their husbands have every right to take them back again if they desire to be reconciled. The wives also have rights of their own comparable to those their husbands have over them, in all fairness, while men's rights take precedence over theirs. God is all-strong and all-wise. (2.228)²³

Clearly, this *aya* refers to a particular law, while many in Bangladesh attempt to prove male supremacy on the assumption that this text is an absolute and universal statement about all husband-wife relations. Social justice is the issue here. A woman's capacity to give birth can be a burden as well as an advantage. In the context of divorce a woman is acknowledged to be in an advantageous position as she carries the child in her womb. On being divorced, if she is found to be pregnant, the husband should have the right over the wife to plead for reconciliation, as the child is his also. Some scholars argue that:

... "precedence" here refers to the legal protocol that a husband has the first option to rescind a provisional divorce. Although a wife may refuse to resume the marriage after a provisional divorce, even if her husband wishes to do so, he has the legal, if not the psychological, initiative in repairing the relationship.²⁴

This liberal interpretation does not go against either the spirit or the letter of the Qur'an. The whole verse, read in its context, does not justify divinely ordained low status for women.

A Just God

Women in Bangladesh realise that the quoting of qur'anic verses by the supporters and opposers of women's subordination might not solve any problem for women unless first of all Muslims reconfirm their belief in a God who is absolutely just. If God is just and the Qur'an is the Word of God, injustice and oppression cannot be perpetuated in the name of God and the Qur'an. Bangladeshi women find the central message of the Qur'an in verses such as this one: "These are the signs of God: we rehearse them to thee in truth: and God means no injustice to any of His creatures." (3.108) Women insist that every verse must be read in the light of the quintessence of the Qur'an which is the concept of Allah as altogether just.

Women show that the Qur'an warns in clear language: "The blame is only against those who oppress men with wrong-doing and insolently transgress beyond bounds through the land, defying right and justice: for such there will be a penalty grievous" (42.42). The Prophet said "Be afraid, from the curse of the oppressed as there is no screen between his invocation and Allah."²⁵ Although the translators of the Qur'an and the *Hadith* usually use exclusive language, the Qur'an does not allow the assumption that the above texts concerned men only. The Qur'an dedicates one chapter, *Sura Mujadila*, "The Woman who pleads", to prove that oppression against women is no less grievous. The chapter begins:

God has indeed heard [and accepted] the statement of the woman who pleads with thee concerning her husband and carries her complaint [in prayer] to God: and God [always] hears the arguments between both sides among you: for God hears and sees all things. (58.1)

This *aya* was given in the context of an old Arab custom *Zihar*, a divorce practice which was advantageous for men and injurious for women and children. A suffering woman complained to God and to God's Prophet, resulting in the abolition of the custom. The God of the Qur'an opposes the oppressor and liberates the oppressed, not only in the hereafter but here and now. In the footnote, the translator and commentator A. Yusuf Ali writes: "For he is a just God, and will not allow human customs or pretences to trample on the just rights of the weakest of his creatures."²⁶ Rasheda Begum, a Bangladeshi feminist, says: "The more I understand how just my God is, the more I honour my creator. This understanding empowers me to get involved in the struggles in order to establish justice in my society."²⁷

The God of the Qur'an gives the oppressed the right to defend themselves: "And those who, when an oppressive wrong is inflicted on them, [are not cowed but] help and defend themselves ... his reward is due from God: for God loveth not those who do wrong" (42.39-40). The weak often lack sufficient strength to fight on their own. God, therefore, urges the Muslims:

And why should ye not fight in the cause of God and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated [and oppressed]? – men, women, and children, whose cry is: "Our Lord! rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from thee one who will protect; and raise for us from thee one who will help!" (4.75)

Islam takes oppression very seriously and, according to the *Hadith*, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, the Prophet is known to have said, "If the oppressor has good deeds, those good deeds will be taken from him according to his oppression which he has done, and if he has no good deeds, the sins of the oppressed person will be loaded on him."²⁸ Oppressors are always the powerful of the world. It is often they who are entrusted with the application of the law. For subjects to bring their ruler to justice is no easy task. In the worldly justice system the powerful have ways of escaping punishment and so the Prophet warned his people in a sermon: "What destroyed the nations preceding you, was that if a noble amongst them stole they would forgive him, and if a poor person amongst them stole, they would inflict Allah's legal punishment on him."²⁹

Mercy in Islam

People who are not well acquainted with Islam might conclude from the emphasis on justice that Islam is a rigid, legalistic religion. However a student of Islam cannot but notice the abundance of the sense of mercy of God that permeates the whole of Islamic understanding. Each chapter of the Qur'an, except for chapter nine, which, according to some scholars, was not intended as a separate chapter, has a prefix, "In the name of God, most gracious and most merciful". Muslims are asked to begin all their work with the same formula remembering God's graciousness and mercy. "Allah's Apostle said, 'When Allah completed the creation, he wrote in his Book which is with him on his throne, 'My mercy overpowers

my anger’.”³⁰ Justice and mercy are the standards of God and these are the standards prescribed for the Muslims:

The spirit of the *Shariah* shows that the benefit of doubt goes to the offender even if it is very slight. There is a *hadith* of the Holy Prophet which sheds light on this spirit. He said: “Ward off punishments as far as you find it possible to ward it off”. There is another *hadith* in which he is reported to have said: “Ward off punishments from the Muslims as far as it lies in your power; if there is any other way out [for the offender] to be let off, then let him off, for if the *Imam* commits error in forgiving, that is better than his error in inflicting punishment”. (Tirmidhi). These *ahidith* show that it is better to err towards leniency rather than to err in giving punishment.³¹

Women in Bangladesh understand that no society can survive unless an equilibrium is created by bringing down the high and mighty and by protecting the rights of the underprivileged. This can only be done when people in a society have a strong sense of justice, mingled with love and mercy.

Christian Women Re-Read Their Scripture

Christian women in Bangladesh, who experience injustice in their society, reflect deeply on their own situation and the situation of their Muslim sisters. As Muslim women re-emphasise the centrality of the Qur’an in Islam, so Christian women stress the centrality of Jesus and the gospels in Christianity. Although there has never been any doubt in Christianity about the centrality of Jesus, Bangladeshi women note that, regarding women’s position in the community and other important Christian moral issues, it is obvious that the Christian church gives more importance to Pauline and other epistles than to the gospels. By misusing the epistles the church sometimes finds a way of reinforcing the *status quo*. This helps the powerful and harms all who are victimised by the status quo. Women are particularly adversely affected by church teachings, based on the epistles, concerning the status of women in family, church and society. Bangladeshi women reclaim the centrality of Jesus by asking the same questions as were raised by St. Paul himself: “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor.1,13)

One of the original objectives of NPK, mentioned above, is to enable women “to arrive at their own theological understanding of their value in Christianity, looking particularly at the example of Jesus and his revolutionary attitudes and behaviour towards women”.³² Women at NPK are primarily attracted to the gospel narratives rather than to particular texts for two reasons. Firstly, because the method of selecting particular texts from the Bible (especially from the Pauline texts) out of context is identified as an oppressive hermeneutic. Secondly, because of the very nature of the gospels, the largest part of which consist of stories: the parables of Jesus, the accounts of Jesus’ interactions with people and the narratives of his life, death and resurrection. Thus the centrality of the gospel narratives is emphasised. However, many of the gospel narratives themselves have previously been used to prove that sinfulness, especially sexual sinfulness, is an inborn trait in women. In these stories, according to popular interpretation “Jesus is the embodiment of grace and the woman is the embodiment of sin”.³³ Women at NPK workshops find a new way of reading the gospel accounts.

So far it has been difficult for the Christians of the Indian subcontinent to relate the gospel context to their own. They saw Jesus and the Bible only from the perspective of western theologians. Even the paintings of Jesus brought to the Indian subcontinent always portrayed Jesus as a white man with blue eyes. These pictures are still predominantly used by Christians in Bangladesh. In the colonial period the Asian identity of Jesus and of the scriptures was silenced by western preachers who trivialised Asian religions and cultures. In

today's Bangladesh Jesus is reclaimed as a person from West Asia, more akin to the Bengalis than to the westerners.

Bangladesh presents a context that is in some ways similar to first century Palestine. Here, through both Islam and Christianity, the culture itself is deeply influenced by the religious understanding of West Asia. Women in Bangladesh view Christianity as standing between Judaism and Islam, as is indeed its historical position. In Bangladesh a Christian woman finds herself in relation to these two traditions: scripturally the Jewish, and empirically the Muslim. The biblical context often directly corresponds to the contemporary Bangladeshi context. When NPK women read the gospel stories in their historical context, as well as in the context of contemporary Bangladesh, Jesus speaks clearly to women.

From various gospel narratives, especially the ones in which Jesus related to women, it becomes explicit that in him there is no longer Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female. Jesus is understood as one who in his lifetime never showed any partiality towards a race, class or gender. He had the courage that never compromised with injustice and oppression; the courage that always took sides with the oppressed rather than with the oppressors; the courage that never shrank from challenging the power structures, even at the risk of his own life. The exploration of the gospels soon leads women into the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Women find that the biblical women occupy a place in the scripture from where the central message of the Bible is conveyed. Either as sufferers of injustice or as active subjects, biblical women are seen as participating in life, challenging, resisting and even transforming the patriarchal culture in which their stories were told. The biblical vision of the God of justice shines through the accounts of these women. The narratives testify that God aligns with the oppressed against their oppressors. The choosing of marginalised women from the Bible and of reading the scripture from their perspective are essential elements in liberation spirituality.

The dispossessed women, in their search for a just God and a just society, strive not only for theological theories but for theological praxis in which theory is totally bound up with praxis. The process through which this theology is created is a hermeneutical circle which can best be illustrated by referring to the process of a theological workshop.

A Theological Workshop

First, at an NPK workshop, women are encouraged to give voice to their suffering, often through the method of story-telling, role play and acting. In the next stage, the suffering is reflected on theologically, again through the story-telling method. A particular scriptural narrative is read with fresh eyes from the perspective of women. This reflection causes women to articulate their questions and suspicion about the structure that causes the suffering. The scriptural interpretations given by religious leaders are often seen as the cause of their suffering. This generates the will to change the oppressive situation. Often some actual change takes place.

After the action, there is more reflection, but by this time women have already risen to a higher level of understanding. Their self-esteem is also raised. Within the workshop, in response to scripture, they continue to apply all three essential elements of human life – feeling, thinking and willing – in order to improve their condition. Reflection followed by action, which in turn leads to further reflection and renewed action, form the hermeneutical circle and the theological praxis. This is more correctly a hermeneutical spiral as, each time the circle is completed, women's self-esteem is raised and they proceed towards a deeper understanding of their own situation as well as of the scriptural text.

Hagar and Sarah

The story of Hagar can be used here to show how a dialogue between a biblical narrative and the contemporary Bangladeshi context can help to clarify both the biblical story and the contemporary situation of women in Bangladesh, giving birth to a Bangladeshi women's liberation spirituality. Genesis chapters 16,1-16 and 21,8-21 are read – not from the perspective of Abraham and Sarah, but from that of Hagar.

In the biblical narrative the Egyptian Hagar is introduced as Sarah's personal slave who can be used to solve Sarah's problem of barrenness. Sarah advises Abraham to sleep with Hagar so that Sarah might gain the honour of motherhood through the child of Hagar. Abraham listens to Sarah. Hagar becomes pregnant. At the event of her pregnancy, Hagar's self-esteem is raised and "her mistress was lowered in her esteem."³⁴ Sarah is not pleased. She treats Hagar harshly. Abraham does not protect Hagar from his wife and Hagar flees. In the wilderness God's angel meets Hagar and tells her to go back to her mistress, but also blesses her. Hagar is to have descendants too many to be counted: a son, Ishmael, is to be born to her. Hagar believes that she has seen God. Ishmael is born in the house of Abraham and Sarah. Later on Sarah also has a son Isaac. Sarah does not like Ishmael and Isaac playing together. Hagar and Ishmael are driven out. In the wilderness Ishmael is dying of dehydration. God shows a well to the distressed mother. Ishmael lives long enough to get married.

Like Hagar, a Bangladeshi woman suffers violence in her home and the abuse of her sexuality, and is oppressed both by men and by women, who collude with patriarchy. Her spirituality – her speaking of God and with God – arises within her state of being abandoned and homeless, unable to provide for herself or for her dehydrated, dying child. An aspect of life that is a major influence on Bangladeshi women's spirituality is the spiritual integrity of the poor. It is in this respect that the parallel with the experience of Hagar is especially significant.

It was in the depth of her suffering that Hagar met God. Like Hagar, a Bangladeshi woman is not severed by hardship and injustice from her God-experience. A Bangladeshi woman who shares the anguish of the biblical character, Hagar, cannot but draw deeply on her life experience when doing theology. Despite oppression in the name of religion, Bangladeshi women have not given up religion or God, as it is religion (or more accurately God) who has continued to be the source of strength for these suffering people. As religion has given power to the oppressors, so it has strengthened the oppressed to survive for a very long time. Without any conscious spiritual search, many poor women have known God in the depth of their beings. What is new in today's Bangladesh is that women are also consciously seeking the God of justice.

It is her own and her sisters' acute pain that has opened a Bangladeshi woman's eyes towards God in a new way. When women from all walks of life gather together in grass-roots organisations to ask questions about their suffering reality, often their cries are directed towards God who is called upon with intensity. For women in Bangladesh, theology is "... an active healing power in the midst of despair. Theology as vision quest is not an escapist, otherworldly addiction of the oppressed."³⁵ Bangladeshi theology is committed to the search for a new transformed society.

If the narrative of Hagar is compared to the current international power struggle, a Bangladeshi woman can be seen as Hagar and her Euro-American sister as Sarah. A Bangladeshi woman can easily be identified with the gentile slave, because she too is dispossessed on account of her ethnicity and economic and political standing, as well as her

gender. Nationally and internationally a Bangladeshi woman is the exploited one. Sarah is also under the constriction of patriarchy, but she is not dispossessed in every sense. A German feminist scholar writes: "I remain a colonial mistress even if I live as responsibly as possible."³⁶ Just as the biblical Hagar could gain nothing by identifying with Sarah as long as Sarah remained the oppressor, so Bangladeshi women cannot possibly benefit from connecting with western feminists until racial, economic and political divisions are acknowledged as clearly as gender issues in their feminism. Rosemary Radford Ruether's western ecofeminism draws a clear distinction between the two different contexts, that of the poor and the rich women:

We are those who profit from most rapacious system of colonial and neo-colonial appropriation of the land and labour of the earth ever created. We need to repudiate this system, starting with its benefits to ourselves, by asking how we can use these benefits to stand in solidarity with the women of the poor.

We need to keep the reality of these women firmly in our mind's eye, as they hold the child dying of dehydration from polluted water, and trek long hours to fetch basic necessities, and also as they continue to struggle to defend life with a tenacity that refuses to be defeated and celebrate with a fullness of spirit that belies the seeming hopelessness of their situation. Only when we learn to connect both our stories and our struggles, in a concrete and authentic way, with women on the underside of the present systems of power and profit, can we begin to glimpse what an ecofeminist theology and ethic might really be about.³⁷

Western feminists are still very far from connecting their stories and struggles with Bangladeshi feminists with authentic commitments, and therefore the gap between rich and poor women remains.

In the international context today, when the Christian West is seen as the oppressor, a Bangladeshi Muslim woman can clearly be identified with the gentile Hagar, but the Bangladeshi Christian woman's identity is more complex. Although Christian, she benefits nothing from the Christian West, sharing her Muslim sisters' experience of oppression, and yet she is often seen by them as a Sarah, identified with the oppressors. Therefore a Bangladeshi Christian woman bears the sin of fellow Christians as well as the tremendous responsibility of challenging oppressive forms of Christianity, and of reclaiming the liberating aspects of that religion.

The biblical account of Hagar is set at the beginning of the Jewish community. Abraham and Sarah are seen behaving according to their cultural expectations. God alone in the narrative is setting the ethical standard for them. Yet it is quite extraordinary that "her-story", written from the perspective of an Egyptian (black!), slave woman, Hagar, occupies such a prominent place in the theological history of Abraham and Sarah. Hagar and her son are not sent to the wilderness to be forgotten for ever, but to be remembered from generation to generation.

After their own Exodus experience, the Israelites understand the predicament of Hagar in a much deeper way. In the Exodus teachings God speaks clearly against the wrong done to people like Hagar and Ishmael: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; my wrath will burn ..." (Ex.22,21-24). Nothing is known about whether God's wrath did burn against Sarah and Abraham for mistreating Hagar and Ishmael. This verse forbids abuse, but there are many biblical texts which also urge people to take care of the likes of Hagar and Ishmael:³⁸

... the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God. (Deut.10,17-20)

The Genesis story of Hagar ends with God providing the virtual orphan and the virtual widow with water. The Bible does not state whether the last part of this verse, “You shall also love the stranger”, is obeyed by the people of God regarding Hagar and Ishmael.

The story of Hagar, the mother of the poor, testifies that “blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (Matt.5,8), as proclaimed from the top of the mountain by Jesus. Hagar is the one who claimed to have seen God. The Genesis story records the promise of God to Hagar “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude” (Gen.16,10), and about Ishmael God said: “I will make a great nation of him” (Gen.21,18). The uniqueness of this promise is noteworthy, as the progeny is promised to a woman. In the declaration of Jesus, the Beatitudes later re-echo this promise, “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth” (Matt.5,5). The Bible does not say whether Hagar and Ishmael, the meek, inherited the earth, whether they had a plot of land that they could call their own.

Muslim Beliefs

In Islam, the *Hadith* takes up the story of Hagar where the biblical narrative ends. According to Yusuf Ali:

Like the Cities of Refuge under the Mosaic Dispensation to which manslayers could flee (Num.35.6), or the Sanctuaries in Mediaeval Europe to which criminals could not be pursued, Mecca was recognised by Arab custom as inviolable for the pursuit of revenge or violence.³⁹

The *Hadith* records that Hagar and Ishmael take refuge in Mecca. This may imply that they have fear of being pursued. In the biblical narrative, on her first journey, Hagar faces Egypt; but on her second journey she faces the other way. The Bible takes them up to the wilderness of Paran, while the *Hadith* places them further south-east, in Mecca. Muslim tradition confirms that these meek people did indeed inherit the earth. The Muslims record the fulfilment of God’s promise, made possible because the Arabs gave asylum to the destitute woman and her fatherless child. They loved the strangers as themselves.

The Muslims claim Hagar and her child as their “arabicised” ancestors and call Hagar the mother of the Muslims.⁴⁰ When they say their prayers, all Muslims face the Ka’ba which is situated in the part of Mecca where the Muslims believe that Hagar and Ishmael settled. They aim to visit the Ka’ba once in a lifetime. One of the rituals they observe when they go on *hajj*, their pilgrimage, is to walk round the Ka’ba. They then go round the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times, remembering the distressing walk of Hagar. According to the Muslims, God has prescribed the remembrance of Hagar’s attempt to find water as an important part of *hajj*. They drink the life-giving water of the well Zamzam which was given to Hagar by God’s angel to save the life of Ishmael. Thus the Muslims refuse to forget the story of Hagar.⁴¹

The remembrance of the stories of Hagar and others like her in past and present lies at the heart of contemporary Bangladeshi women’s theology, as it is based on the strong understanding of the nature of God, who

... chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one may boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor.1,27-29)

Mahatma Gandhi, who was profoundly struck by the Sermon on the Mount, said: “Consider the poorest person you know and ask whether the next step you take will be any use to

them”.⁴² For this ecumenical women’s group, NPK in Bangladesh, both Christian theology and inter-faith dialogue are futile unless they take account of the well-being of the poorest, the Hagars of today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Bangladeshi Christian and Muslim women experience transcendence in the normal everyday world. Their revolutionary hope and struggles for justice are rooted within human experience and yet point beyond everyday reality. “It starts from experience but takes seriously those implications or intentions within experience that transcend it – and takes them, once again, as signals of transcendent reality.”⁴³ The process of understanding God in Bangladesh occurs inductively rather than deductively. Bangladeshi women’s inductive faith moves from human experience to statements about God. It is opposite to deductive faith which begins with certain assumptions and statements about God and moves to interpretations of human experiences. Bangladeshi women’s experience of transcendence is not individualistic mystical interior spirituality, it is liberation spirituality that arises from common experience leading to common hope of a transformed society.

The God who is revealed through human experience in Bangladesh is a righteous God. The righteousness of God is not an abstract quality in the being of God. This Judaeo-Christian-Muslim God is an active God who was involved in history in the times of the writing of the scriptures – and is involved in history now making right what human beings have made wrong. The biblical and qur’anic prophets who experienced the transcendent – to whom God was revealed – became prophets of social justice. Today’s Bangladeshi Christian and Muslim women who experience the transcendent also become prophets of social justice. They understand that no one can be free until all are set free. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed this point persuasively:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, [no one] can be totally healthy... . Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I am ought to be.⁴⁴

Women in Bangladesh understand who they are in the network of mutuality and then they understand who God their creator is. The question “Who am I?” is directly linked with the question “Who is my God?”. The question of social justice takes Bangladeshi women directly to the heart of God who is altogether just. Thus Bangladeshi women regain a metaphysical dimension to their vision when they dedicate themselves to the work for social justice.

Some Eastern Orthodox painters understood this mystery of life clearly. In their frescoes and icons the resurrected Christ does not rise alone from the dead. He is seen as one going down to the underworld to grasp the wrists of both Adam and Eve and pull them out by his strong hands. The mystical experience of resurrection is futile for Jesus Christ until he shares this experience with the whole of humanity. Bangladeshi women pull women and men out of the darkness of divisions and experience resurrection, liberation and salvation. The transcendental experience of Bangladeshi women challenges the authenticity of such individualistic mystical experiences as are unaffected by, and have no effect upon, other human lives.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), *Aurora Leigh*.
2. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), see especially pp 66-96.
3. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, "Pipasa", in "Matichur I", in Abdul Kadir, ed., *Rokeya Rachanabali* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1984), p.16.
4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur", in W. H. Gardner, ed., *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953), p.27.
5. Sakhawat Hossain, "Sourajagat", in "Matichur II", in Kadir, ed., op.cit., p.25
6. Chung Hyun Kyung, "'Han-pu-ri': Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective", in Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds., *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p.136.
7. Ursula King, "Introduction", in Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK/Orbis Press, 1994), p.18.
8. Zeenat Ahmed, "Karan Tumi Nari", in *Mahila Samachar*, a bulletin (Dhaka: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, November, 1986), p.15.
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10. Frazer Mascarenhas, "Oppression of Women Through Religion", in Usha Bambawale, ed., *Woman in The Family*, Streevani seminar papers (Pune 411001: Streevani Documentation Centre, 1995), p.77.
11. Sakhawat Hossain, trans., "Delicia Hatya", in "Matichur II", in Kadir, ed., op.cit., p.179.
12. Mascarenhas, in Bambawale, op.cit., p.78.
13. Betty Milstead, "Feminist Theology and Women in the Muslim World: An Interview with Riffat Hassan", in Riffat Hassan, *Selected Articles* (Montpellier: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1989), p.2.
14. See the Qur'an: 39.6 and 7.189.
15. The Qur'an: 2.35-39, 7.19-25 discussed in Arifa Salam Sharmin, "Islam, Nari Purush Samparka o Bibartan", a paper presented at a workshop on *Bivinna Dharmiya Drishtikone Nari* (Dhaka: Netritto Proshikkhon Kendro, 24 September 1993), pp.3-4.
16. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans., *The Translation of the Meanings of "Sahih Al-Bukhari", Arabic-English*, vol.4 (Medina: Islamic University, Medina Al-Munawwara, 1971), pp.345-346.
17. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p.43.
18. Riffat Hassan, "Women in the Context of Change and Confrontation within Muslim Communities", in Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, ed., *Women of Faith in Dialogue* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), pp.99-100.
19. John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.398.
20. Mernissi (1991), op.cit., pp.44-45.
21. Riffat Hassan, in Mollenkott, ed. (1987), op.cit., p.99.

22. A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text Translation and Commentary* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1975), p.74. Unless otherwise stated all qur'anic references are to this translation.
23. Kenneth Cragg, *Readings in the Qur'an, Selected and Translated by Kenneth Cragg* (London: Collins Religious Publishing, 1988), p.314.
24. Leila Badawi, "Islam", in Jean Holm with John Bowker, eds., *Women in Religion* (London: Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1994), p.104.
25. Khan, trans., *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, op.cit., vol.3, pp.376-377.
26. See Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an* (1975), pp.1103 and 1510. *Zihar* was an Arab custom "by which the husband selfishly deprived his wife of her conjugal rights and yet kept her tied to himself like a slave without her being free to remarry".
27. Stated in interview with me, September 1993.
28. Khan, trans., *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, op.cit., vol.3, p.377.
29. Ibid., vol.4, p.453.
30. Ibid., vol.4, p.453.
31. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, trans., *Sahih Muslim*, vol.4 (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1977), pp.912-913.
32. Mukti Barton, *Netritto Proshikkhon Kendro: Annual Report, 1988-1989* (Dhaka: Netritto Proshikkhon Kendro, July 1989), pp.1-2.
33. Gail R. O'Day, "John", in Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), p.297.
34. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p.12. Trible cites New Jewish Version (NJV).
35. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (London, SCM Press Ltd. 1991), p.101.
36. Luise Schottroff, "The Creation Narrative: Genesis 1. 1-2.4a" in Brenner, ed. (1993), op.cit., p.35.
37. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women", in *Liberating the Vision*, Summer School Papers (Southampton: LSU College, 1996), p.134.
38. For example: Lev.19,34; Deut.14,29; 16,11-14; 24,14, 17, 19, 20-21; 26,12-13; 27,19 and many others.
39. Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an*, p.52.
40. See H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, eds., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), p.179: "Ismail is also considered the ancestor of the North Arabian tribes. In the Arab genealogies, the Arabs are divided into three groups: *al-ba'ida* (those who have disappeared), *al-ariba* (the indigenous) and *al-mustariba* (the arabicised)".
41. For a Muslim account of Hagar see Khan, trans., *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, vol.4, pp.372-382.
42. Cited in Michael H. Taylor, "The Priority of the Poor: A Christian Strategy Reconsidered". *Hartley Victoria Commemoration Lecture* (12 November 1993, Christian Aid), p.3.
43. Berger, op.cit., p.83.
44. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd edn. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), p.xix. Cone cites Martin Luther King, Jr., "The American Dream", *Negro History Bulletin*, vol.3 31 (May 1968), p.12.

GLOSSARY

Arabic

<i>aya</i>	verse of the Qur'an
<i>fuqaha</i>	jurists who interpret the Qur'an and <i>Hadith</i> literature
<i>fatwa</i>	formal legal opinion or decision issued by a Muslim judicial authority
<i>Hadith</i>	written record of actions or sayings of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. For a single item of tradition, I have used <i>hadith</i>
<i>hajj</i>	the pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>imam</i>	Muslim prayer leader
<i>Shariah</i>	Muslim religious law
<i>Sunna</i>	Muhammad's <i>Sunna</i> comprises his deeds, utterances and teachings
<i>sura</i>	chapter of the Qur'an
<i>tafsirs</i>	commentaries on the Qur'an which are themselves based upon <i>Hadith</i> literature or the explanations of the jurists (<i>fuqaha</i>)

Sanskrit and Bengali

<i>shakti</i>	strength, especially feminine power
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THE AUTHOR

Mukti Barton is an Indian Bengali Christian married to an English clergyman. From 1981 to 1992 she lived in Bangladesh, where she founded and directed an ecumenical women's training centre for doing theology from women's perspectives, with the aim of developing feminist consciousness and of struggling for justice for women in the family, church and society. The experience on which she draws in this paper is rooted in Bangladesh. Both in English and Bengali, she has published several articles and one book (*Creation and Fall and the Women of Bangladesh: A Contextual Study*, Dhaka, 1992).

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This paper is based upon her PhD thesis entitled *Scripture as Empowerment for Liberation and Justice: The Experience of Christian and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*. The model of religious experience on which her work is based is an experience of transcendence rooted in death-defying hope and a struggle for justice.

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