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Islam and Diversity: Alternative Voices within Contemporary Islam

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Abstract

Islam contains a greater plurality of theology than is often realised. Here two "alternative voices" are chosen as examples of how cultural accretions can be questioned to what is taken to be the original, pure voice of Islam. Amina Wadud has led a mixed congregation in prayer in New York and has demonstrated, not without opposition, that women can be imams. There follows a discussion of the historical debate about women as imams and reactions to Wadud's actions. The second voice is Hasan Askari, an Indian Muslim who has written widely on inter-faith dialogue. He maintains that to reduce differences between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, differences should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally. He questions all claims to finality in any religion and he believes that historical Islam has yet to be transformed to "universal Islam". Religious differences can only be finally transcended at a level of mystical experience.

Keywords

Islam, diversity, alternative voices, Amina Wadud, Hasan Askari

I have selected two scholars as examples of theological plurality and of questioning, alternative voices within contemporary Islam. They are very different from one another: Amina Wadud is an activist feminist and academic now based in the USA, who does not shy away from media attention, and Hasan Askari, who is a far less publicised theologian but well known in interfaith-dialogue circles. Both raise issues which will immediately resonate with a Catholic audience and through them, I hope to show that there is plenty of scope for sharing and comparing ideas and experiences. At the same time, however, I feel that in order to engage in meaningful dialogue, differences ought not to be underestimated, along with a constant awareness of diverse and specific theological, historical and other relevant contexts.

Amina Wadud is Professor of Islamic Studies at the Virginia Commonwealth University; she wrote on ethnicity and Muslim identity,

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but she is best known for her works on gender.[1] She famously led a mixed (male and female) congregation in March 2005 of around 100 Muslims in *salat* (ritual congregational prayer), at the Synod House of the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York city. The unusual location can be explained by the refusal by three New York mosques to host what was, for many Muslims an illegitimate and unacceptable event: a female imam leading a mixed congregation in prayer. This is not the first time that Amina Wadud has made a public statement on the status and roles of women in Islam. In 1994 she had delivered the *khutba* (sermon, or for some the pre-*khutba*) at Clermont mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. Both events were reported by newspapers all over the world with varying degrees of attention.

With regard to the New York event, the Egyptian scholar and on-line *mufti* Yusuf al-Qaradawi replied to queries about the stance to be taken concerning female imams by stating:

> Throughout Muslim history it has never been heard of a woman leading the Friday Prayer or delivering the Friday sermon, even during the era when a woman, Shagarat Ad-Durr, was ruling the Muslims in Egypt during the Mamluk period.
>
> It is established that leadership in Prayer in Islam is to be for men. People praying behind an imam are to follow him in the movements of prayer—bowing, prostrating, etc., and listen attentively to him reciting the Qur'an in Prayer.[2]

To support his statement al-Qaradawi quotes a number of *hadith*s, which specify that the position of a woman in congregational prayer is in the back rows, not in front; hence, he infers, she could not lead others. Nevertheless, he quotes *hadith*s, which give evidence of the precedent of two of Muhammad's wives, 'A'isha and Umma Salama leading other women in prayer. He also summarises a *hadith*, reported by Imam Ahmad, Abu Dawud, and others:

> on the authority of Umm Waraqah, who said that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) appointed a muezzin for her, and ordered her to lead the members of her household (who included both men and women) in prayer.[3]

[1] 'American Muslim identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam" in O. Safi, (ed) *Progressive Muslims*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2003, pp. 270–85; and on gender her monographs *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective,* Oxford University Press, New York, 1999 and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam,* Oxford: Oneworld, 2006.

[2] From http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503549588&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaEAskTheScholar, see also al-Qaradawi's Arabic homepage www.qaradawi.net.

[3] http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503549588&pagename=Islam Online-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaEAskTheScholar. See also Ibn Sa'ad

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However, al-Qaradawi's on-line statement concludes his response in a less objective, but clearly more charged, manner:

> My advice to the sister referred to in the question is that she should revert to her Lord and religion and extinguish this strife which is unnecessary to be lit. I also advise my Muslim brothers and sisters in the United States not to answer this stirring call and to stand as one in front of these trials and conspiracies woven around them.[4]

Al-Qaradawi is not the only Muslim scholar who uses the issue of women as ritual or religious leaders to express his opinion and further his own agenda. His response highlights not so much the issue of women imams per se as his concern to keep the *umma* (Islamic community based on ties of faith) united, to avoid alternative interpretations of texts and to reject unspecified conspiracies aimed at undermining the unity of the *umma*. All in all, al-Qaradawi's response is a fairly balanced review of the sources, if compared to that of another, this time a Saudi, grand-mufti. Al-'Allamah 'Abdul-'Aziz Ibn 'Abdullah al-Shaykh, Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Chairman of the Permanent Committee of Islamic Research and *Fatawa* (legal opinions), when asked for his comments about a woman leading a mixed congregation in *salat*, answered:

> By Allah, if the people have reached this level – if the people have lowered themselves to this level, this is evil upon evil. A woman is not permitted to lead a man in prayers. If a woman has reached a level where she desires to lead men and women in prayers, it should be known that her purpose and the purpose of her followers in doing this is not to bring good, rather it is to wage war against Allah and His Messenger . . . . It has not been recorded in Islamic history that a woman led men in prayers, and it was never done. So how can these people come and establish a Friday prayer with men and women mixed together, and a woman leading the prayer? This is in reality a most repulsive matter . . . . This Friday prayer is invalid, and it is not permissible for a Muslim to attend it.[5]

The Saudi grand-mufti's statement is more encompassing than that of al-Qaradawi: it is not limited to the action of Amina, at the limit of being a *kafira* (unbeliever), but extends to that of the participants in the event, who are seen as doing something illicit, *haram*.

Muhammad, *The Women of Madina, TaHa,* London, 1995, transl. by A Bewley, according to whom the Prophet "commanded her to act as an imam for the people of her household (*dar*)" and Ibn Rushd, *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer*, Vol 1, Garnet, Reading, 1994, p.161: "he ordered her to lead the members of her household in prayer".

[4] http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503549588&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaEAskTheScholar,

[5] http://www.maroc.nl/nieuws/forums/showthread.php?s=&threadid=133617

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The mufti's intention was to counteract "the war" waged against Islam.

What lies behind the issue of female imams? After all, an *imam* is but a leader of the congregation, a pious Muslim, esteemed by the community, who knows the sequence and words of prayer. Technically speaking, the requirements for becoming an imam have traditionally been fairly basic, so much so that the tenth-century renowned historian, jurist and Qur'anic exegete Abu Ja'far Muhammad al-Tabari, (died in Baghdad in 923 CE), for example, could pride himself on having become an imam at the tender age of 8.

My argument is that, broadly speaking, the issue of female imams both in the classical and the contemporary era, can in fact be analysed from a perspective of overlapping contexts and corresponding discourses. Specifically in the present debate, not only can the issue be placed within broader gender discourse in Islam but also discourses of local and communal identity, as well as of religious, domestic and international political arguments.

The role of the imam has in fact evolved beyond being the leader of prayer, and it is still evolving. This is especially so among Muslim minority communities, where the role is being enriched by pastoral, educational, cultural, political and other roles, which would accordingly require a different and more comprehensive training than the one 8 year old al-Tabari would have needed. Hence, a fuller research on female imams should be located within two interrelated discourses: that on gender, particularly on female spiritual and religious authority, and that on the social, cultural, theological and other identities (and identity-making) of Muslim minorities in areas where the issue of female imams appears at present to be most evident: in the West, in China, and in South Africa. Such geographical contexts are significant in themselves and Amina Wadud is but one, perhaps the best known, representative of a specific need that, in different contexts, is emerging in these areas. There are indeed reports of female imams in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region of China where Muslim women lead female-only congregations and teach at female-only mosques. Moreover, the call for female religious education which women can then impart to others is much broader than that of becoming imams as evidenced by the opening in 1962 of a women's college at al-Azhar, the most prestigious and oldest Islamic University, and by the establishment of a number of educational institutions and colleges across Islamic denominations, to name a few: in India, in Indonesia, Malaysia and Britain, to train *'alims* and *'alima*s (scholars in Islamic sciences).

Among the several interpretative keys to Amina's actions, I intend to focus on three: the form – or the gesture itself, the content and the context.

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The gesture or the extent to which a Muslim woman can be an imam

Whether or not a woman can act as imam is not a "modern" issue in Islam. Indeed there are textual references to jurists' opinions on the matter from the early centuries of Islam. The main divide lies in the type of congregation the woman is leading.

With regard to a female only congregation, all Islamic legal schools, with one exception, would agree that a pious Muslim woman can indeed act as imam. Nevertheless, to stress her position of equality among other women, some *hadiths* specify that, instead of placing herself in front of the assembly, she should be in the middle of it. Both arguments for and against the role of a female imam for a female-only congregation rely on historical precedent. Those in favour would refer to the *hadith*-based evidence about two of Muhammad's wives: 'A'isha and Umm Salama, who are reported to have led other women in prayer. On the other hand, Maliki jurists, well known for their conservative stance especially with regards to female matters would argue that, apart from the exceptional cases of Muhammad's wives, had women been given permission to lead congregational prayer, this would have been transmitted since the early generations of Muslims. As this was not the case, it is not deemed permissible. They also adduce the argument of religious ideal and social conventions, specifically female modesty and seclusion. Finally, not clearly spelt out but implicitly assumed, is the issue of ritual purity (*tahara*) whereby a menstruating woman or one of child-bearing age with any discharge, is deemed impure to perform, let alone to lead, religious rituals such as *salat* (ritual prayer), *hajj* and fasting during Ramadan, which would consequently be considered as invalid.

As for female leadership in prayer for a mixed congregation, the majority of scholars would agree that a woman cannot lead men in prayer, the reasons provided range from a presumed lack of historical precedence, religious and social conventions to issues of ritual purity. A few, isolated scholars, however, did argue in favour of women imams of a mixed congregation, for instance the jurist Abu Thawr al-Kalbi (d. 854), and the already mentioned historian and jurist Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. They support their argument on the above-mentioned precedent of Umm Waraqa. The reasons why these and a few other scholars made statements in favour of female ritual leadership – or indeed female religious and spiritual leadership and authority *per se* as in the case of Ibn Arabi – are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that they can be linked to the wider context of alternative legal traditions (Abu Thawr and Tabari), of religious practice and spiritual worldview (Ibn Arabi and Sufism), or of sectarian identity.

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The issue of female imams seems most unusual if placed against the background of the cultural practice (and a stricter interpretation of modesty rules) whereby women, during specific periods of Islamic history and in certain areas, have not been encouraged or even allowed to attend the mosque for the congregational Friday prayer.[6] Though necessary for a scholarly analysis of the issue on women imams, the textual evidence summarised above was not discussed by Amina Wadud before or after the New York event of 2005 (with the exception of a reference in passing to Umm Waraqa in her latest book). She deliberately avoided making statements and engaging in the public, media-focused debate. Textual evidence has been, however, selectively adduced by al-Qaradawi and other contemporary Muslims in their responses to Amina's action.

The content of Amina's gestures and sermons

In her brief comments on the reactions to her Cape Town sermon and her New York leadership of *salat*, Amina laments the almost universal silence on the content of her sermons.[7] Her 1994 Cape Town *khutba* was an almost impromptu elaboration on the concept and meaning of "Islam" as "surrender" which she explained as "engaged surrender", and which she illustrated through the example of pregnancy, childbirth and marriage. For Amina, surrender is not a given, a *fait accompli* but a continuous engagement, which implies acceptance but also a letting-go. She illustrated this concept with a very female example: while a pregnant woman comes to accept the foetus inside her, in giving birth she submits to the contractions and, through them, to the necessity and ability to "let go". The women in the Cape Town congregation did indeed relate to such examples and experiences, to the extent that their responses reflected a feeling of acquired self-empowerment. In contrast, the 2005 New York *khutba* had been prepared with great care and had a more articulate and intellectual theological content. It was delivered in Arabic with extracts in English; specific Qur'anic verses were selected which are well known to all Muslims but especially to those aware of contemporary gender discourse. Amina selected the egalitarian verses of sura 33.35: "the men who surrender and the women who surrender, the men who believe and the women who believe . . . Allah has

[6] There have been public and media reports in Britain, for example, about some mosques not allowing women to enter their premises to perform salat. This issue is being addressed by Muslim leaders in Britain as specified in the 2007 *Draft Constitution of MINAB (Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board)*, Article 2, objective c) Advice on improved access and involvement of women and youth to mosques, p. 2.

[7] See Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, p. 172. For the text of her Cape Town sermon and her considerations on the New York event see ch.5.

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prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward", as well as the verse from *Surat al-nisa'* (4.1) at the basis of the equality of creation of humankind: "He has created you from a single *nafs* (a living being, a soul) and created from it, its mate". Amina's selection was to illustrate what she defines as the "*tawhidic* paradigm" or horizontal reciprocity between humans, particularly the male and female. In the English translation of her New York *khutba*, Amina alternates the female and masculine pronouns, He and She, when referring to Allah, using the feminine when emphasis is on Allah's attributes of mercy and forgiveness, a Lord of love and mercy rather than being a Lord of power. These few remarks will lead to my third interpretative key, the context, that is the positioning of Amina's gestures within the broader theological, cultural, ideological, historical, even personal contexts and influences.

The contexts for Amina Wadud

The language and arguments Amina used in her *khutba*s are shared with those of other feminist scholars and thinkers. To an extent, Amina acknowledges the influence of feminism when she states that she converted to Islam "coincidently... during the important second wave of feminism in the West".[8] She responds to the critique by several Muslim scholars against Muslim feminists' West-inspired interpretative methodologies by stating that today Muslim women's movements, even though historically heavily influenced by Western theories on women's rights and social justice, have developed into acknowledging the need for an indigenous Muslim theory and practice of reconstruction in human rights discourse. Through her elaboration of the "*tawhidic* paradigm" as a re-inscription of gender symmetry, whereby both male and female are of equal significance, her gesture of ritual leadership can be seen as one of the many roles in which a woman can function when she develops the prerequisite qualifications. In other words, in Amina's view, male leadership in prayer is not a theological requirement, but merely the result of custom, of historical and cultural precedents.

Amina is one of the feminist voices in Islam, critical and self-questioning, who does fit comfortably across the traditions of Muslim feminism by combining the values of the Radical Muslim Feminism of Malak Nassef with the methods and social activism of the Liberal, originally Westward-looking type of Muslim feminism, such as that of Nawal El-Saadawi. The geographical contexts in which she operates, America and South Africa, reveal her awareness of her

[8] A. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad,* p. 3.

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American-African identity but also the influence of the American Civil Rights movement, as well as the appeal for African-Americans of the Da'wa movement in the USA as a response to racial discrimination and as part of a long campaign of black empowerment. That her *khutba* was first delivered in South Africa, and significantly in the progressive Muslim environment of Cape Town, is witness to the South African effort of re-conceptualization over notions of pluralism, equality and liberation and the endeavour to include gender in the discourse over social and political justice. Moreover, whether or not she can fully subscribe to the ideals and aims of the American progressive movements or groups (The Progressive Muslim Union endorsed the New York event), she is nevertheless influenced by ideas and positions of progressive Muslims worldwide, such as those of the South-African liberation theologian Esack Farid and various Muslim women's organizations.

Finally, and I include this because Amina herself spells it out in her latest, partly autobiographical book, is the relevance of her personal history. Born in 1952 in Maryland into a Methodist family, with the example of her father, a Methodist minister who died "poor, black and oppressed in the context of racist America"[9] , she converted to Islam during the 1970s while a student in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her choice of new names and identity is already revealing of her understanding of Islam: Amina means 'believer', Wadud is one of the beautiful names of Allah, meaning the "Loving God of Justice", the "All Loving".[10]

The overall significance of Amina's voice and witness is in her interpretation of the concept of *tawhid* (Unity of God) as active inclusiveness, specifically, but not only, gender inclusiveness, and in her application of it as a paradigm for her "gender *jihad*", that is for her struggle against gender prejudices and other injustices. She has been and continues to be inspirational and influential for her constantly reaffirmed aim for Muslim women to appropriate Islamic primary sources. Such an aim is shared with other Muslim scholars such as, just to cite two, Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi and more recently Pakistani born academic Asma Barlas.[11] Amina regards such examples of textual re-appropriation by Muslim women as a fundamental strategy of their empowerment and development.

Also of relevance is her controversial stance on religious pluralism or the right to choose one's religion, for non-Muslims and for

[9] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad,* p. 4.

[10] Cf Qur'an 11.90; 85.14

[11] See in particular F. Mernissi, *Women and Islam: an Historical and Theological Enquiry*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, 2004; and A. Barlas, *Believing Women: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2002.

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Muslims alike. She believes in freedom of choice in religion, including that of Muslims converting to other faiths. What matters to her is how faith is lived, rather than belonging to a particular religious tradition. There is no need to explain how controversial such a statement can be, especially in view of radical and traditional interpretations of *hudud* (shari'a endorsed punishments) with regards to apostacy (*ridda* or *irtidad*).

My second 'alternative voice' to illustrate pluralism within Islam and who might help us to understand the function and status of the religious "other" is Hasan Askari

Known as a pioneer of interfaith dialogue, Askari was born in Hyderabad, India in 1932, was associated with the Birmingham-based Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations and taught in several universities in Europe, the USA and the Middle East, and the renowned Aligarh Muslim University of India. In 1978 he wrote *Society and State in Islam*[12] where, in view of the traumatic events of India's partition and the migration of Muslims to Pakistan, he challenged the belief that it is not possible to live the life of a Muslim in a non-Islamic or secular state. In 1991, Askari authored *Spiritual Quest: an Inter-Religious Dimension*, a collection of old and more recent articles and lectures, which contains a self-reflection and evaluation of his long standing work in inter-faith dialogue.[13]

In 1985 he co-edited with John Hick a book on the experience of religious diversity.[14] In his contribution to the volume, Askari focused on the Semitic monotheistic trio of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He contended that, in order to build on the differences between these three religions, differences need to be understood symbolically rather than literally. This way it is possible to gain a dynamic understanding and to acknowledge diversity as a movement (for him and for all Muslims, a progressive and evolutionary movement) within religious history. In Askari's opinion, what underlies such diversity and renders the conflict between these three religions constructive, rather than destructive, is the acknowledgement of the conviction (or the experience) that there is an "Absolute Truth" which underlies all three religions. Askari's understanding of "progressive" revelation mirrors the wider Islamic vision of religious history whereby, while Christianity was a transformation of Judaism, Islam extended such a transformation by incorporating, but also critiquing, Christianity.

[12] H. Askari, *Society and State in Islam: an Introduction*, Islam and the Modern Age Society, Har-Anand, New Dehli, 1978 reprinted in 1997.

[13] H. Askari *Spiritual Quest: an Inter-religious Dimension*, Seven Mirrors, Pudsey, 1991.

[14] H. Askari, "Within and Beyond the Experience of Religious Diversity" in J. Hick and H. Askari (eds), *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, Gower, Aldershot and Brookfield (USA), 1985, pp. 191–218.

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He explains this concept of transformation by providing the example of Jesus' mission: Jesus transformed Judaism by providing a deeper meaning to its legal precepts and by removing the particularistic and exclusive appeal of the divine message, so that it is no longer for the "chosen people" but for the whole of humankind. Askari does not analyse further whether these two transformations were indeed pursued or carried out by the historical Jesus or were, rather, developed later during the early formative centuries of what was to become a distinct religion. Askari, nevertheless, continues to illustrate his theory of and belief in progressive revelation by explaining that Islam had brought about a transformation of Christianity, comparable with what Christianity had done for Judaism. The main thrust of Islamic reform was directed against the doctrine of incarnation, which, he contends, results in an exclusively Christian way to salvation as well as the removal of the attribute of transcendence from the divine.

There are indeed a number of verses in the Qur'an which reject the belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and Askari quotes one of them which refutes both the doctrine of incarnation and the Trinity (Qur'an 4.171). Askari's contention is that Islam has rectified the Christian explicit act of *shirk* (associating someone else with God, polytheism, idolatry) with the aim of reaffirming God's transcendence and unity. Nevertheless, in Askari's view of progressive revelation, no community is made redundant by the one which follows it. For instance, he states that it is important that Christians and Jews keep their own identity as a service and a pointer to Muslims who "...require a Christian presence amidst them so that they are reminded of what passed between Jesus and another monotheistic community".[15] With reference to Islam, Askari acknowledges that progressive revelation continues to evolve and explains this by making a distinction between historical Islam and universal Islam. Thus controversially, he maintains that those Muslims who "stop or start with Muhammad, are locked up in one step of the ongoing divine revelation",[16] and he clarifies that the universal quality of a Muslim (one who submits to God) oversteps chronological and even religious boundaries. Abraham is the archetype of the universal Muslim that he, along with all Muslim theologians, provides.

The natural consequence of Askari's understanding of progressive revelation is to critique all claims of finality, including that of historical Islam, that is of Muhammad being the seal of the Prophets. Here Askari treads carefully as this is an extremely sensitive issue. He does so in two ways: by resorting to the concept of 'universal Islam' which should in principle transform historical Islam, and by stating that if universal Islam were to abolish the particular/historical

[15] *Ibid*, p. 206.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 199.

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Islam, this should still take place within historical Islam, not outside it. Aware of the impasse on the issue of the finality of revelation, Askari concludes by acknowledging that differences such as this cannot be resolved between different religions at the historical level but only at the level of perceived unity, that is, at another plane of experience, at a state that may be identified with the mystical level where all opposites are reconciled.

Askari develops this mystical theme in his later works where he uses the term "spiritual quest" to express a more encompassing experience than adherence to any specific religious tradition. Quest for him is intra-religious, "the movement from the letter of a belief to its spirit, from the outward to the inward of the religious forms".[17] In a chapter significantly entitled "Towards a Trans-religious Dimension", which represents a self-reflection on his ideas and work, Askari voices his disaffection with some developments in the interfaith movement, which he sees as having moved away from a personal encounter towards the organizational and collective domain. For him dialogue should not be "an exercise in scholastic skills, nor a disguised mechanism to convert the other to one's theological viewpoint", nor a "legitimisation of each other's representational status".[18] Instead dialogue should occur at a personal level as a spiritual event, as "a process of mutual transformation".[19]

His spiritual testament can be summarised in his firm belief in two necessities for interfaith dialogue to be meaningful. First, the theological necessity to acknowledge more than one form of religion, as he firmly believes that ultimate reality cannot be equated with one form only. Second, the spiritual necessity to move from the outward to the inward sphere of religious experience, lest the unity of the ultimate truths is "wrecked in the multiplicity of forms".[20]

Askari's own understanding of religious pluralism has evolved over time and is a reflection of historical, cultural-political and personal circumstances. From the recognition of the religious "other" in the Indian society in which he grew up, to the existential need to acknowledge a peaceful communal co-existence in post-partition India, Askari posits a theological necessity to acknowledge as equally valid, plural religious expressions of, and elaborations on, the divine. Plurality is but a reflection of the very nature of what he defines as Ultimate Reality, which cannot be contained in any single form, in any one religion. Hence, no religion can claim finality over the others. This was as far as a Muslim theologian could go during the 1970s and 1980s. His views were those of a pioneer and the progression of

[17] *Spiritual Quest*, p. 111.
[18] *Ibid*, p. 127.
[19] *Ibid*, p. 127.
[20] *Ibid*, p. 138.

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his ideas bear witness to his constant critical engagement within the confines of Islamic theology.

As a consequence of changed social and political circumstances, of conflicts, ethnic cleansing, political and religious activism, the present-day world is indeed a different place from that of the late 1980s and early 1990s, both in forms of interfaith dialogue and Islamic theology. Theological debates have generally moved on to issues of progressive theology and social justice, including, as we have seen, the pursuit of gender justice by academic and activist Amina Wadud. However, Askari's notion of the theological necessity for pluralism is now echoed in distant corners of the world. From South Africa, the Muslim liberation theologian Farid Esack[21] does not see any contradiction between being a Muslim and accepting theological pluralism, in fact he considers it a necessity in order to create a just society where there is space for the righteous irrespective of his/her religious affiliation. Unlike Askari, however, Esack does not uphold "individual spirituality" as a basis for meaningful dialogue, rather he sees the communal effort and encompassing struggle for social justice as a common denominator. Theological necessity has become more pressing and real in a context like Bosnia, where the grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric (born 1955) adopting a much needed degree of Islamic realism, identifies religious pluralism as a safeguard against another genocide and, on the basis of Qur'anic verses, calls for an inclusive theological approach whereby no religious community has the monopoly of the Truth. In Indonesia too, one of the most famous Muslim progressive theologian Nurcholish Madjid[22] (East Java, 1939-2005) developed an Islamic theology of religious pluralism, a type of relative absolutism of partially shared truth, whereby different communities can work together to achieve social justice by identifying shared ethical codes. Since Askari, the notion of religious pluralism has been further enriched in Islam by, for example, human rights debates on religious freedom as the right to practise, but also to change, one's religion, an issue as controversial as that of the finality of revelation.

I stated at the outset that the two voices I have chosen, Amina Wadud and Hasan Askari, are diverse in their methodology and their priorities. However, they do have much in common: an individual interpretation of the text, which can reinterpret centuries of exegetical tradition, activism and engagement in communal relations, and the challenge to the monopoly of "orthodox" normative paradigms. And

[21] F. Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: an Islamic Perspective of Inter-religious Solidarity against Oppression*, Oneworld, Oxford, 1997.

[22] N. Madjid, "In Search of Islamic Roots for Modern Pluralism: the Indonesian Experience" in M. R. Woodward, *Toward a New Paradigm: Recent Developments in Indonesian Islamic Thought*, Arizona State University, Temple, 1996, pp. 89–116.

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Wadud and Askary have both been writing in contexts where Islam is a minority religion, in the West, in South Africa, in India.

Some contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Tariq Ramadan,[23] have indeed suggested that a novel theological elaboration within Islam is being formulated by scholars living in the West or in minority contexts. They argue that such a theology would be based on the principles of Islam, rather than its cultural, traditional and customary accretions, which grew mainly in Middle Eastern or South Asian contexts. The claim to return to the "original" message of a given religion, devoid of the historical, cultural and social (including patriarchal) elements which made it "deviate from the original purity", is voiced by increasing numbers across most religious traditions. For Amina Wadud original Islam is embodied in the socially just, gender and racial inclusive, egalitarian message of the Qur'an. For Hasan Askari pure Islam is the universal Islam, the Abrahamic paradigm, which he places beyond the historical dimension and which eventually will be resolved in one essential – though multiform – spiritual quest. However, one should consider the extent to which such scholarly voices are themselves the result of social, historical and political circumstances. Hasan Askari's views, for instance, could not be divorced from the context of post-partition India, nor Amina's 1994 *khutba* from post-apartheid South Africa.

What insights can be gained from considering the impact their voices have had on the Islamic world as a whole, beyond particular areas and communities? While Amina's gesture in New York prompted on-line responses by muftis world-wide, it also caused groups of self-styled defenders of the faith to denounce her as not being a Muslim "according to the Qur'an and the hadith".[24] This latter statement, however reveals more than a slogan fit for a poster, it raises the question of who has the authority to interpret the sacred texts and to represent the varieties of Islam in the multiform, local and global, contemporary society.

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[23] T. Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim; Western Muslims and the Future of Islam,* The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 1999.

[24] See the banners and posters featured in the 2007 film by Elli Safari, *The Noble Struggle of Amina Wadud*, The Netherlands, distributed by Women Make Movies (www.wmm.com)

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