

Dialogue: Women and Islam

1. "Sometime during this period, the status of women in Islamic society seems to have changed as well. Various clues suggest to me that in the early days of Islam, women had more independence and a greater role in public affairs than they had later on, or than many have in the Islamic world today. The Prophet's first wife Khadija, for example, was a powerful and successful businesswoman who started out as Mohammed's employer. The Prophet's youngest wife Ayesha led one major party during the schism that followed Othman's death. She even commanded armies in the field, and no one seemed surprised that a woman would take on this role. Women were present at the iconic early battles as nurses and support staff and even sometimes as fighters... (Tamim Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes*. Public Affairs: New York, 113-114)
2. "In the first century after the Hijra, women such as Hafsa, Umm al-Darda, Amra bin Abdul Rahman, and others rose to eminence as authorities on hadith. Some were famous calligraphers. They and others taught classes, took in students of both sex, and gave public lectures." (Ansary 114)
3. "Clearly these women were not shut out of public life, public recognition and public consequence. The practice of relegating women to an unseen private realm derived, it seems, from Byzantine and Sassanid practices. Among the upper classes of those societies, women were sequestered as a mark of high status. Aristocratic Arab families adopted the same customs as a way of appropriating their predecessor's status... The same forces that squeezed protoscience out of Islamic intellectual life, the same forces that devalued reason as an instrument of ethical and social inquiry, acted to constrict the position of women." (Ansary 114)

What about the Qur'an?

4. The Qur'an does not attempt to annihilate the differences between men and women or to erase the significance of functional gender distinctions which help every society to run smoothly and fulfill its needs. In fact, compatible mutually supportive functional relationships between men and women can be seen as part of the goal of the Qur'an with regard to society.¹³ However, the Qur'an does not propose or support a singular role or single definition of a set of roles, exclusively, for each gender across every culture. The Qur'an acknowledges that men and women function as individuals and in society. However, there is no detailed prescription set on how to function, culturally. Such a specification would be an imposition that would reduce the Qur'an from a universal text to a culturally specific text—a claim that many have erroneously made. What the Qur'an proposes is transcendental in time and space.¹⁴ (Wadud, Amina (1999-03-30). *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the*

Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective (Kindle Locations 570-572). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

5. "Women shall with justice have rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have a status above women. God is mighty and wise" (Wadud)
6. 4:19 "Believers, it is unlawful for you to inherit the women of your deceased kinsmen against their will, or to bar them from re-marrying, in order that you may force them to give up a part of what you have given them, unless they be guilty of a proven sinful act. Treat them with kindness; for even if you dislike them, it may well be that you dislike a thing which God has meant for your own abundant good."
7. 4:20 "If you wish to replace a wife with another, do not take from her the dowry you have given her even if it be a talent of gold. That would be improper and grossly unjust; for how can you take it back when you have lain with each other and entered into a firm contract?"
8. 4:32 "If you avoid the enormities you are forbidden, We shall pardon you misdeeds and usher you in with all honour. Do not covet the favors by which God has exalted some of you above other. Men shall be rewarded according to their deeds, and women shall be rewarded according to their deeds. Rather implore God to bestow on you his gifts."
9. 24:30-31 "Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments (except such as are normally displayed); to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, and their husbands, brothers, sons, the step sons, their women-servants, and their slave girls; male attendants lacking natural vigor, and children who have no carnal knowledge of women. And let them to stamp their feet when walking so as to reveal their hidden trinkets."
10. Sura 4:34 that "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard."

Thomas Aquinas and Woman's lower status

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

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Advent edition) and [Summa Contra Gentiles](#) (Jacques Maritain Center edition). Italics in the text by John Wijngaards.

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The male is separate from the female because the male is more ordered to intellectual operation

I answer that, It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a "helper" to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, *since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works*; but as a helper in the work of generation

Among perfect animals the active power of generation belongs to the male sex, and the passive power to the female. And as among animals there is a vital operation nobler than generation, to which their life is principally directed; therefore the male sex is not found in continual union with the female in perfect animals, but only at the time of coition; so that we may consider that by this means the male and female are one, as in plants they are always united; although in some cases one of them preponderates, and in some the other.

But man is yet further ordered to a still nobler vital action, and that is intellectual operation.

Therefore there was greater reason for the distinction of these two forces in man; so that the female should be produced separately from the male; although they are carnally united for generation. Therefore directly after the formation of woman, it was said: "And they shall be two in one flesh" (Gn. 2:24). **Summa Theologica I, qu. 92, art. 1.**

Woman is subject to man because in the male reason predominates

[It is said by way of objection] 'Subjection and limitation were a result of sin, for to the woman was it said after sin (Gn. 3:16): "Thou shalt be under the man's power"; and Gregory says that, "Where there is no sin, there is no inequality." But woman is naturally of less strength and dignity than man ' [But I say] Subjection is twofold. One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin. There is another kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. *So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.* Nor is inequality among

men excluded by the state of innocence, as we shall prove (96, 3). **Summa Theologica I, qu. 92, art. 1, ad 2.**

Man's superiority over woman flows from his having been created first

When all things were first formed, it was more suitable for the woman to be made from man than (for the female to be from the male) in other animals.

First, in order thus to give the first man a certain dignity consisting in this, that as God is the principle of the whole universe, so the first man, in likeness to God, was the principle of the whole human race. Wherefore Paul says that "God made the whole human race from one" (Acts 17:26).

Secondly, that man might love woman all the more, and cleave to her more closely, knowing her to be fashioned from himself

Thirdly, because, as the Philosopher says (Ethic. viii, 12), the human male and female are united, not only for generation, as with other animals, but also for the purpose of domestic life, in which each has his or her particular duty, and *in which the man is the head of the woman. Wherefore it was suitable for the woman to be made out of man, as out of her principle.*

Fourthly, there is a sacramental reason for this. For by this is signified that the Church takes her origin from Christ. Wherefore the Apostle says (Eph. 5:32): "This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the Church." **Summa Theologica I, 92, art. 2.**

Man is the image of God in a way a woman is not

The image of God, in its principal signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman. Hence after the words, "To the image of God He created him," it is added, "Male and female He created them" (Gn. 1:27). Moreover it is said "them" in the plural, as Augustine (Gen. ad lit. iii, 22) remarks, lest it should be thought that both sexes were united in one individual. *But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature.* So when the Apostle had said that "man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man," he adds his reason for saying this: "For man is not of woman, but woman of man; and man was not created for woman, but woman for man." **Summa Theologica I, qu. 93, art. 4 ad 1.**

A woman's hair is a sign of her subjection

"The woman's hair is a sign of her subjection, a man's is not. Hence it is not proper for a woman to put aside her hair when doing penance, as it is for a man." **Summa Theologica Supplement , qu. 28, art. 3 ad 1.**

See also Thomas Aquinas's view on woman being [a defective male](#).