



# musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

## **The Ethics of *Tawhid* over the Ethics of *Qiwamah*** **Amina Wadud**

In this chapter, Amina Wadud shares her personal and intellectual trajectory of grappling with the concepts of male authority and gender inequality as articulated in the dominant readings of Qur'anic verse 4:34 and norms that have been based on these interpretations.

She first looks at the context of Islam amongst African-Americans in the United States and the impact this context has had on her theology, spirituality, ethics and activism. African-American Muslims have countered the burdens of slavery, institutionalised racism, assaults on masculinity, and sexist violence in America through patriarchal constructions of the family. They have held onto *qiwamah* as an ideal even though African-American men do not and cannot function as the sole providers and protectors in the racist environment, and women routinely contribute to their families. The realization of this led Wadud to search for ethical values and a spiritual worldview in the Qur'an that could support new notions of an 'ideal' family beyond the *qiwamah* model.

Wadud then outlines her engagement with other Muslim women around the world and their struggles to overcome binaries within feminism and religion. She shares her experience at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, where a caucus of Muslim women quickly divided into two main polarized perspectives. One believed that Islam is irretrievably patriarchal and must be kept out of any discussion regarding women's human rights; the other promoted a patriarchal and uncritical understanding of Islam as the way to establish the roles of Muslim women in society. Participants were urged to choose between the two: either Islam without full and equal rights, or human rights and feminism without Islam. Wadud was one of many women looking for a third way, which has since further developed, for women to move beyond patriarchal theology while maintaining their identities as believers.

Wadud shares how she has worked to develop a new construct built upon the fundamental Islamic principle of *tawhid* (monotheism or the unicity of Allah). The principle of *tawhid* affirms that God is one; that all attributes of Allah and their essences are in absolute harmony and unity; and that Allah is unique and thus does not have gender. Most importantly, the principle of *tawhid* unites people and things that are seemingly different; safeguards against hierarchy and oppression; and enables relations of reciprocity, equality, and harmony. Since there is no Islam without *tawhid*, Wadud proposes the tawhidic paradigm as a way to overcome the injustices of *qiwamah* and reach the goal of a society that is built on Islamic ethics. If social interactions are to be grounded in the principle of *tawhid*, then they will, by necessity, lead to egalitarian and equal relationships since hierarchy and dominance negate 'engaged surrender' to God, which is the goal of every Muslim wishing to be true to the principle of *tawhid*.

Wadud is proposing rethinking Islam *through* Islam itself, without the confines of patriarchal interpretations and the cultures they spawned. Since the ultimate objective of Islam is equanimity and reciprocity, not hegemony, this ethic can be applied to gender relations in the family, and indeed to all human relations.