

Dr. Amina Wadud Leads the Ummah in an Historical Prayer
 "Spritual Equals, Please Stand Up"
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 Naseeb Vibes

I realize that this single act of leading mixed congregational prayers won't transform the community, but is symbolic of the possibilities within Islam.

Editor's Note: No woman has publicly led *Jumma* prayers in 1400 years, but now there is a growing demand from women in America to reclaim what they say is their "Islamic right" to a more dignified entry into the mosque and to active participation. Dr. Amina Wadud is the leading Muslim scholar on Islamic history whose decision to lead *Jumma* on March 18th 2005 has caused awareness about the movement world-wide, but threats of violence against her and the congregation have led organizers to move the event to a discrete location. Just a few days before the event, Dr. Wadud talks to Vibes in an exclusive interview about why the time to lead is now and why the person is her.

VIBES: When did you decide to lead a mixed Jumma congregation?

Dr. Amina Wadud: I've been thinking of this for over a decade. I've done it in small groups before and talked about it in the past.

VIBES: Did you also bring this up in discussions with your class?

Dr. Amina Wadud: No, it's hard enough to discuss the topic with Muslims, let alone non-Muslims.

VIBES: Media hype usually distorts causes such as this. What is the message and impact you'd like to emphasize when the dust settles?

Dr. Amina Wadud: I'd really like for everyone to understand the process of living Islam, along with its complexities that don't always have the 9th and 10th century's approval. Islam is growing, and it is an ongoing situation, and Muslims need to be proactive members of this experience. They have been proactive when they wanted to be.

Take for example the economics of oil-rich countries. They have managed to integrate their economics with that of the global market which does charge interest, despite the belief that usury is forbidden. They have managed to think out the matter, and devised a strategy within capitalism in relation to Islamic

principles.

This is also true of slavery. It was standard practice at the Prophet's time, and you can tell from reading the Quran that it was an established institution. Though Islam allowed for freeing of slaves, it never abolished the institution. Yet, at this point in history slavery is not practiced, because there is no justification of its practice. The end conclusion was that the principle of *Ijtehad* will be used to discontinue slavery even when the Quran did not advocate for its immediate end.

But, the issue of gender equality is a very important one for Muslims and instead of moving forward, there is a tendency to move backward, using highly restrictive interpretations of History. These interpretations, I am afraid to say, do not sustain the Quranic spirit. They may appease literally, but don't cater to the underlying principles, such as justice for all human beings.

The Quran and Sunnah operate in a system requiring human interaction, and it is in this system that ideas and changes to implement those ideas can better demonstrate the Quranic mandate for justice; not its patriarchal interpretation of the past, where women were submissive.

Islam is a phenomenon for religion. The Quran worked to eradicate the previously negative practices toward women, and moved forward to justice. We must realize that this was done 14 centuries ago. At that time, it was not even possible to imagine women with spiritual equality.

VIBES: Why exactly wasn't it possible for women to have spiritual equality then?

Dr. Amina Wadud: I am not sure. I don't know why, but I do think that you need to move ahead. We are members of our current History. We make History, we imagine our future. Leading salat (prayer) is representative of the devotion to ritual as well as the capability of participation for women.

VIBES: Have we evolved to a level, in terms of sexuality that gives this movement the positive response you're looking for? Don't efforts like this backfire because women are objectified, regardless of their intellectual motivations?

Dr. Amina Wadud: There are many things that I would like to see, but I know I never will see in my lifetime. Still, it is very important that we try and demonstrate the possibilities, so that our future generations can bring those essential changes to life.

VIBES: Why do people demand that you state your sources for leading prayers, as opposed to following the edicts of common sense and appreciating needs of a changing society?

Dr. Amina Wadud: Within the framework of intellectual development, common sense is always considered inferior and insufficient to *hadith* or *fiqh*. Even within *fiqh* and *hadith* there are wide ranging opinions; some supporting women leading prayers, others against it.

The final analysis is that each human is responsible for being a *Khilafa* who must act like an agent responsible to obey Allah, according to the ir best understanding of interpretations from experts as well as for discussing alternatives brought about by real life experience.

The second caliph of Islam, Hazrat Omar did not collect the booty as referenced in the Quran. This booty taking was a common practice at the time when the the Quran was taken more literally. The idea that Omar did not collect it at that time reflected his preference for the underlying principles of justice in the Quran which we need to emphasize even more today. Studies have exposed that those times were ridden with class status issues, and the Quran promoted efforts to eradicate the discrepancies arising from the status roles. In this case Omar decided that taking the booty would not be in the spirit of the Qur'an because of financial hardship

I am inclined to understanding the Quran in egalitarian terms and to have the khilafa (or moral agency) to make it a part of Islam. I trust that Allah will make good come out of it. When a woman leads *jummah*, it allows us to show that women that make up half of the community are also concerned with practices of Islam's rituals.

VIBES: What pressures are you facing as you plan to see this through?

Dr. Amina Wadud: We live in the age of the Internet. I am subjected to interpretations of my beliefs as projected by the one making the interpretation even when those interpretation aren't actually articulations of my own beliefs and research. Opinions on the topic or on me, come from people who don't know me. One must know their basic lessons in *fiqh* and realize that their insinuations do not validate my humanity.

Instead of reaching out to understand what I am trying to do, like you here are doing by interviewing me, some people have come up with their own set of answers

which doesn't even remotely resemble my intent. People must realize the immense risk of doing that: slander.

VIBES: Is this step easier for you because you are an African American Muslim woman, and don't have the traditional-cultural baggage that Arab or Asian women may have.

Dr. Amina Wadud: I am not a group, I am an individual. But I suppose it was my upbringing that played a part in my courage. My role model was my father, who was a Christian Minister. He taught me to be the best that I could, and to be responsible before Allah so that when I am called to judgment, I stand on my own without reference to what people have been saying. Therefore, I don't determine what Allah is or what Islam is based on people's mis-interpretation of my intent. My upbringing led me to the acceptance of Islam as a choice.

My objective within Islam was the same. I wanted Islam to be the best that it can be, and for myself to be the best Muslim that I can be, within the framework of the information available to me. I was raised with the notion of honesty and integrity to one's religious devotion.

It is easy to fool people into believing that you are satisfying your religion, and following it right, by certain external performances, but those were not some of the reasons that worked for me. The interpretation that I should shut up and sit down was not the method that I would use to live Islam. I cannot be an agent or a *khilafa* unless I am honest about what is in my heart.

VIBES: Is it true that pre-Islamic women were braver and more out-going than those in the post-Islam era?

Dr. Amina Wadud: No, I don't aspire to this view. Take the Prophet's wife, Khadija. She was unable to manage her own business without a male representative. She didn't have an active involvement in business. She may have had superior resources, but no social context within which to operate.

I don't believe necessarily that women before Islam had different empowerment in a good way. It is however certain that the Quran mandated corrective action to restore the honor of women, which had never been done before with the same tenacity as the Qur'an mandated. Any restrictions that were placed were only on the basis of helping to maintain justice. Men would for example, divorce at will and not honor their heritage, and the guidelines were placed to reflect what women at the time wanted. There was a correction of the imbalance through this. Men's paternity rights and responsibilities were explicit in the Qur'an

Pre-Islam era was not a state that necessarily curtailed freedom but certain hypothesis about women's exclusive control over the paternity of a child were corrected by the Qur'an.

VIBES: Do you suggest the same course of action for women in predominantly Muslim countries?

Dr. Amina Wadud: I don't pretend to know what they should do. But, I have had responses from all over the world and major Muslim parts of the world from women who are encouraged by this. I very much dislike the media frenzy that has accompanied this, but despite its negative aspect, it has symbolically made women accept what they believe: they have spiritual equality and not just the men.

The fact is that a mixed congregational prayer is in no way a precedence of sorts, but simply a public announcement that should lead to positive feelings. I realize that this single act won't transform the community, but is symbolic of the possibilities within Islam.

VIBES: Don't you suppose it would be a better course of action to isolate those mosques that are exclusivist and formulate more egalitarian alternatives instead?

Dr. Amina Wadud: A single thing won't resolve this, we need multiple things for this to succeed. There is ample evidence to suggest that women have been involved actively in changing the practices that harm women in US mosques. There is a collective demonstration of action nationwide, and they need collective help in establishing day-to-day mechanisms of equality.

VIBES: What would you like to say to Vibes readers?

Dr. Amina Wadud: They must identify with things that they recognize as important. I believe in the spirit and love of Allah, and if they do too, no single historical event should be the basis of their interpretation. At the end; it is Allah who has more power than an event.