

Muslim Women Reformers

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A book by Sydney-based Dr. Ida Lichter, Muslim Women Reformers brings to light the many Muslim women around the world who are risking their lives to bring changes to the way Islam is interpreted and imposed especially on women and children. As well, we hear from the African-American Islamic scholar, Amina Wadud, who made headlines when she led Friday prayers of men and women in New York City. But her major work is through Qur'anic studies that are intended to liberate the text from a male-centred view.

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Rachael Kohn: They're risking their lives to do it, but women in the Muslim world are speaking out and trying to change the political and religious traditions that have kept them down.

Hello, I'm Rachael Kohn. Today on *The Spirit of Things* the image of the submissive Muslim woman will be overturned.

One of the most challenging of Muslim women is American-born Amina Wadud, a Qur'anic scholar who occasionally leads Friday prayers of mixed men and women. Amid bomb threats and fatwas, she nonetheless claims the Qur'an supports equal treatment of men and women. I spoke to her when she was in Australia and she'll join me later in the program.

But first, we'll take a sweeping look at the feminist movement in the Muslim world. That task has been made all the easier because of a new book, *Muslim Women Reformers*. It's a survey of 27 countries, and was written by Australian psychiatrist, Ida Lichter. It's a fascinating read as well as a highly instructive one, given how little is reported in the press about the efforts of these women.

Ida Lichter: Thank you very much for having me on your program, Rachael.

Rachael Kohn: Well you've written a very valuable, encyclopaedic reference book which surveys the Muslim world and the women who are fighting for improvement in their conditions. Now Ida, you're not Muslim, so what prompted you to focus your attention on this subject?

Ida Lichter: I've often asked myself the same question. But I was living in London for a long time, over ten years, in an area where I noticed increasing Islamisation. I was very aware what was happening in the press after 9/11 and got to know the stories of some of the reformers, secular reformers, who were talking about Islam and problems of women's reform, and I started reading about these ladies. But as I got into the subject, I found that there was a mountain of others who were involved with reform but were never in the public domain. And interestingly enough, I started with Afghanistan, and I found that some of them were medical people like myself, so there was a lot to identify with, and I also realised there was a great deal of personal sacrifice there. I was particularly impressed by Massouda Jalal of Afghanistan, who stood for President actually, and she was a psychiatrist, like me, and a paediatrician, and she'd given up her career to help her country, and I found that a lot of these

women had a tremendous intellect. They were fearless and they were nothing like the stereotypes of the submissive Muslim woman that I was used to.

Rachael Kohn: And that you would have seen perhaps around you in London.

Ida Lichter: Exactly. And when I read what they were saying, they seemed to me voices of reason. They were speaking up against violence, for example. But I also became aware that their voices were being closed off because many of the regimes were filtering and shutting down their websites. And also we have I suppose, a sensational press in the West, and that sort of press is provocative. They're not going to promote people of moderate views necessarily, not consistently. And I felt that a book was possibly the only way of amplifying the voices of these women, and increasing general awareness, and I also began to ask myself the question, Why is it that we are leaving the field to the radicals, when we could be supporting the reformers?

Rachael Kohn: And you've certainly given us many reformers to think about in this book. When you first started your research, were you at all aware of how large the field was, how many women out there were actually fighting for reform in their countries?

Ida Lichter: I wasn't at all aware, Rachael. I was amazed when I was trawling the internet and the databases of the libraries, how many there were, and I wanted to do justice to them. I realised that in general, you could divide them into a couple of categories. The secular ones, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, to Taslima Nasrin who want to change Islam completely. Maybe even abandon it. They want to see a transformation.

The problem is that these sort of reformers are easily disqualified from the debate, but the vast majority, I mean really the vast majority, are quite different. They want to do something perhaps revolutionary, they want to reclaim Islam, they want to reclaim what they call the egalitarian Islam, and they have the most to lose if a heretical form of Islam takes hold and becomes dominant, and they've got the most to gain if they can get their point of view across.

Rachael Kohn: But of course they're seen as the heretics, that's the problem.

Ida Lichter: Yes. I must say that I was also aware that we were going through a historic period for Muslim women reformers. This was a time when they were beginning to define themselves, as themselves and not defined by men in a male-dominated society. And the other thing that impressed me was that there were so many reformers around. I mean even amongst the men. And apart from supporting these women on moral grounds, I became aware of all the common interests we have in the world. For example, unlocking the potential of women in the Muslim world. This is something that people of goodwill everywhere can understand, but these women are an important social economic and political resource. They can make a social difference, as we've seen in countries like Northern Ireland and Argentina, where they're given a voice, they can make a difference. And also we've got a lot of common interests with progressing Muslims. For example, if you look at the Arab Human Development Report in 2005, this was all about women. It's an appendix in my book, and they put it so well in their statement. They say, 'An Arab renaissance cannot be accomplished without the rise of women in the Arab world'.

Rachael Kohn: Well is it a question of just changing the socioeconomic status of women, or does it go deeper, does it have to be about changing Islam in some ways? Because many

Western analysts see this in merely socioeconomic terms, materialist terms, women just need to be part of the workforce and things will change.

Ida Lichter: The socioeconomic factors are definitely true to some extent. But it's not the whole story. You could even argue that the restrictions on Muslim women have led to their impoverishment, and that the poor situation is more likely due to the religious traditional and political restrictions. If for example, you look at Saudi Arabia, that's a rich society, but the women are severely restricted. The women of Iran are also similarly restricted because of the strict Sharia laws in the Iranian theocracy. And in Tunisia, women are hardly restricted, and that's a society with the full spectrum of rich and poor. So how are these cultural and religious aspects woven together? Well it's interesting to see what some of the reformers say about this. They say it's to do with the tribes, and the patriarchy. Basically they say that it's a monotheistic religion in the hands of the leaders and the State and the religious authorities. And that this is mirrored in the family where you have the man as the patriarch. On top of this you've got a tribal situation where men take control for reasons of property, therefore they've got to control marriage and women. Women become a problem sometimes, because they can be very beautiful, you might have to cover them up. And in these tribal societies, men's honour is very much dependent on the behaviour of the women around them. So this is the way it's developed. It's cultural, and it's religious.

Rachael Kohn: And it has socioeconomic consequences, obviously. Well given the recent interest by Australian Muslims to introduce Sharia law into Australia, how much did you find that the Muslim women who want reform are actually focused on Sharia and focused on its family dimension.

Ida Lichter: Well I found that most of the reformers in most of the Middle Eastern countries, the women, in countries where there are varying degrees of Sharia, they want to reform these laws, they see them as discriminatory. They reject Sharia law on several grounds, I would say; 1) because it's discriminatory and therefore morally wrong; 2) because it's a pretext of control, a way to control women and 3) because it's a false interpretation of the holy texts, and reformers in the West have challenged these attempts to introduce Sharia, and I must give you an example of what happened in Canada.

Homa Arjomand fled to Canada from Iran. She knew what radical Islam was like in her own country. And she found that there was a new organisation in Canada, in Ontario, which called itself the Islamic Institute of Civil Justice. What this was doing was trying to influence Canadian Muslims to use Sharia law instead of civil law, for settling disputes. There had been arbitration courts, religious courts, for a long time, and she said these had discriminated already in matters of marriage, divorce and custody, and the result had been that domestic violence had gone unpunished, financial support and access to children after divorce was minimal, and even children were sent to home countries where under-age girls were forcibly married. What she really feared was a parallel legal system.

So she started an organisation called the International Campaign against Sharia Court in Canada, and lobbied the then Premier of Ontario, Dalton McGuinty, and in the end, what he did was ban all religious arbitrations, and he initiated new legislation which mandated the sole use of Canadian law. I must admit also that she went further, she and other reformers have said, 'Well look, let's see why this is happening', and their explanation is simply that this rise of Islamic fervour, which has been exported to the West, comes from Saudi Arabia,

which has used its vast oil wealth to write new books etc., and send their imams. And also another interesting reason, admiration for the Iranian Revolution.

Rachael Kohn: That's interesting because in fact in your book, Iran has the largest number of entries. Women reformers have risen up in Iran, at great peril to themselves, it's absolutely amazing that they get as far as they do. Can you tell me about a couple of the women there, in particular Shirin Ebadi seems to be the most extraordinary. She was the Nobel Prizewinner. What sort of issues is she fighting for?

Ida Lichter: She is fighting for the same issues that the women's movement in general is fighting in Iran. And there you see a whole spectrum of women ranging from religious and less religious. And they're all together. And what are they fighting? The discriminatory laws. And they're saying, 'Let's not talk about religion, let's talk about the laws which discriminate against us as women: polygamy, temporary marriage, guardianship, all these problems that affect our everyday life. We want to be able to wear what we like, when we like it, etc.'

Rachael Kohn: And what about education? Are women allowed to pursue any topic or any subject they would like?

Ida Lichter: There is a quota. There are certain faculties which are not open to women. But on the whole, women have done pretty well. I think about 60% of the tertiary graduates are women. And when you look at what happened after the revolution, women had a bad deal. But when the repression started, they at least salvaged something in the long run, they salvaged the right to go to school and to have an education. And one more important thing: the right to vote. So what Shirin Ebadi is saying is there's a lot that can be done and she has already shown in her own life after Khomeni's revolution, all the female judges were sacked. It took her 13 years of peaceful protest to get them back again, and so she's using that model. She's also very strong on this patriarchal interpretation of the holy text. She says, 'That's obsolete, and furthermore, contemporary problems call for contemporary solutions.' And she emphasises that the inequalities that they're all talking about are more political than religious. And they stem from this idea that women have to be controlled by men. She says something funny. She says, 'Instead of telling women to cover their heads, we should tell them to use their heads.'

Rachael Kohn: Indeed. Well at least in Iran they're able to use their heads more than they are, it seems, in Saudi Arabia, where women are not even given the vote. So what sort of hope is there for transformation and reform in Saudi Arabia, which I think many of the reformists have described as a country of infantilised women.

Ida Lichter: In Saudi Arabia you have a situation where there's a very strong religious element which comes from the Wahhabi ideals which were there at the inception of Saudi Arabia, and that's mixed with a Salafi Element which came in the '60s after Nasser threw out the Muslim Brotherhood, these people came to Saudi Arabia. And this has developed in Saudi Arabia and produced the sort of strict Sharia system that we see today. Very difficult to change.

But having said that, the current ruler, King Abdullah, has been making changes, and it has to do to some extent, these top-down changes, with the sort of efforts that are being made by reformers within Saudi Arabia, and it's remarkable, because there are certain vocations that are not open to them, they turn to vocations like journalism, which opens the world to them.

Of course there's some censorship, but they're able to publish, particularly in the Arab newspapers in London, and they are saying things which have never been said.

Rachael Kohn: Ida Lichter, speaking about the inspiring Muslim women who are fighting against oppression in their countries. Her book, which surveys the field, is called *Muslim Women Reformers*.

Later we'll hear from one of the leading Muslim women reformers, The Qur'anic scholar, Amina Wadud. And also at the end of the program, a few words from Sakeena Jacoobi, the voice of hope in Afghanistan.

Now back to my conversation with Ida Lichter, who's been documenting the courageous stands that women have taken in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia to improve the status of women.

What are the repercussions for that? I mean your book also documents imprisonment, torture, the closing down of organisations and websites, so what sort of challenges do these women face after they have expressed their reformist views?

Ida Lichter: There are lots of problems, but they're not worried. They're going ahead regardless, because they've got everything to gain and they've also got everything to lose if they lose this battle. So they're going to work very, very hard. On the education front, they are doing very well. There's a female university led by a woman in Saudi Arabia. There are plenty of businesswomen, there are conferences. There are problems. For example, Wajeha al-Huwaider, who has fought very hard for the right to drive, came out and held up placards. First of all she did it on her own, and she was caught by the Mahabith, the Secret Police, who detained her and forced her to sign documents so that she would renege on her views and not have any contact with the outside world and other journalists. But she got around that. She keeps on going, and she and others are very savvy with the internet. They've got to know how to use that. She's had a couple of very good internet campaigns. For example one called 'No to the oppression of women'. What she did was to interview women, make videos, and put it on YouTube. These women come on as anonymous people. They tell you what their plight is and what's happened to them, their stories, and she's had another interesting internet campaign where she has been interviewing children, girls, on the street, and asking them what they think about child marriage, because there's still plenty of child marriage and forced marriage in Saudi Arabia. And they say things like, 'Well I'm only a child, how can I look after a child?' or 'I want to be a scientist, I haven't got time to be a mum', and most of the time she gets away with it because you can't control the internet all the time.

Rachael Kohn: Well among the countries that you cover, Malaysia seems to be one that has a much more liberal culture, that is, women there seem to be more effective in opposing movements by the government that are seen as repressive.

Ida Lichter: Malaysia is a very interesting example, and if I think about the reasons for this, I'd have to start with the fact that it's a relatively free society. We're used to a free society, so we don't know what it's like to be in a society where there's no freedom of speech, or freedom of assembly, or freedom of association. So in the countries we've been talking about, that just doesn't exist. So to start NGOs there, is just too difficult, even though they're doing it.

In Malaysia you have a basically free society, so you can have debate in the press, you have people like Zainah Anwar with her organisation Sisters of Islam, who had a column in the press, where she debated issues of women's reform. It was so popular that they had to start a new department just to look after all the correspondence. And also, as I mentioned before, in some of the Arab countries, you've got a tribal structure, and it's very rigid and hard to change. Well perhaps that's not so rigid in Malaysia. And women have had the right to vote there, women in Malaysia have had important positions politically, and also in business. For example, Dr Zeti Aziz is the governor of the Central Bank there. All this has been expressed from the woman's point of view in a very positive way. It's led to a reduce in maternal mortality, the mean age of marriage has increased, the proportion of women with seven children has decreased, the total fertility has decreased, and they've had a lot of access to educational opportunities.

But I'd like to point out something interesting about Malaysia, and this is talked about by one of the reformers in my book. Her name is Marina Mahathir and she is a Women's Right activist, and the daughter of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir bin Mohamad. What she's claiming is that the Muslim Malaysian women are actually being treated as second-class citizens and therefore they're subject to a form of apartheid. Because the Muslims in Malaysia have a separate law under Islam, Sharia, and the non-Muslims are under a secular civil code, they're treated differently, and she's saying that not only is there gender apartheid for women, because of Sharia, but on top of that there's apartheid between Muslim and non-Muslim women, and furthermore, the Malaysian non-Muslim women have benefited from the progressive laws over the years, and the opposite has happened to their Muslim sisters.

Rachael Kohn: Well given that the diversity of cultures and histories in these Muslim majority countries, do you have a sense that Muslim women reformers are united in their stand, or do they have very different agendas, depending on where they area?

Ida Lichter: The general aims I would say, yes, aims for empowerment, definitely. And they're dealing with other common problems like domestic violence and honour killings, but I would say that their specific aims differ according to the political and social and economic conditions in their countries. And I have to point out that in some countries there are top-down reforms that have assisted women, considerably. Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait and to some extent, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. In Pakistan the situation is rather different, because here women are fighting forced illiteracy, especially in rural areas. They have acid thrown at them, in some cases when children are going to school. There are stove deaths.

Rachael Kohn: Stove deaths?

Ida Lichter: Stove deaths, its called choolaa. These are called stove deaths and they're caused by family members who douse a wife with kerosene or gasoline before setting her alight. They ascribe these deaths to a burst stove, and you might wonder why they do this. The reasons for burning wives is usually failure to bear a son or a hostile relationship with a mother-in-law. And often husbands who want to marry a second wife, but can't afford to do so.

On top of that we've got Taliban insurgencies and increased restrictions for women wherever they take control in Pakistan and other areas. Compare that with say, Afghanistan where the basic needs are very high. You've got a high illiteracy rate, a high maternal mortality, but

since the coalition forces have been in the country, there have been more rights for women, including basic freedoms, like freedom of speech and assembly. Compare that with Iran where the needs are less basic but they're focusing on changing discriminatory laws. And of course in Saudi Arabia we've said there's a very strict Sharia.

Now I would say as far as the aims for implementation goes, they are also different. In Saudi Arabia it takes the form of comment, and critique and analysis, because there's no freedom of speech, they can't organise themselves. But in Iran, the women have challenged the system. Why have they been able to do that? Well there's a long history pre-revolution, of women getting together, forming organisations, and in Iran they've actually been on the streets since 2005, and I would say that they were probably the vanguard of the demonstrations that we saw after the elections last June.

Rachael Kohn: Well I want to ask you Ida about the men, that is, are these women fighting alone?

Ida Lichter: The women are probably a little suspicious, and for good reason because of their history and because of history of betrayal. When you take for example, what happened in Algeria, the women were equal to the men at the time of the War of Independence. They worked together, they fought together, they were promised equality, but it never happened, and in Iran they thought it was going to happen. So of course in their consciousness somewhere, you have this. But I think times are changing. For example, last year there was a situation in Iran where a dissident was imprisoned, and the authorities accused him of wearing the hijab, the full chador in order to disguise himself. And in support, hundreds of men came out and just put on the same Islamic dress. It was not only to support him but it also had a meaning. They are thinking about the women.

On top of that you've got little fledgling groups, for example in Saudi Arabia, you have one man, he's starting a new civil rights group for women, Al-Salman. You've got Sulaiman al-Sulaiman who goes on television and talks about how important it is for women to drive. He's prepared to bring their case forward. You have the Druze poet Salman Masalha who forcefully says the only way that Arab civilisation in the Muslim world can come forward is through the freedom it gives women, the liberation of women and this is going to entail men giving up this concept of honour, being dependent on their female relatives. So I think it's starting, and it's inevitable that men in the Muslim world will be affected by what they see in regards to the modernity that's around them.

Rachael Kohn: Well Ida Lichter, are you hopeful that Muslim women reformers will change their Muslim world for better?

Ida Lichter: I think there's such a lot of energy as Ziba Mir Hosseini says, she is an Iranian reformer, 'It's going to be a flood when the gates open'. Up to now, there's been a lot of talk about looking at the Qur'anic laws and promoting this idea called *ijtihad*, which is reform through re-interpretation. This is what they're doing. They're going to become scholars, they are already scholars. They're promoting their scholarship, and they're bringing all the arguments to bear on how egalitarian Islam favours women, that the reason why it hasn't been positive up to now, is because of a male reading of Islam. And they're going to do this quietly and they're going to do it actively as well. And they've got the means to do it. They can disseminate it now. There's no stopping them, it's a very historic time because they're very well educated. So I see it's going to go forward, it's going to be positive, and when I talk to

some of these women, they say, 'Yes, it's definitely a movement', there's no doubt in their minds.

Rachael Kohn: Well Ida Lichter I think your book, which gathers together the voices of Muslim women reformers around the world, gives me hope, and I imagine it will give hope to a lot of Muslim women around the world, and also here in Australia, hope that they can change Islam in a direction that is more equitable for them. So thank you so much for being on *The Spirit of Things*, and thank you so much for your work.

Rachael Kohn: My next guest, Amina Wadud is an American-born Muslim scholar who believes that Islam's early period can inform present day efforts to modify the practice of Islam to give women full and equal partnership in all areas, including leading Friday prayers. Her first book, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* was billed as the first 'pro-faith attempt by a Muslim woman to present an inclusive reading' of Islam's holy book. When Amina was in Australia recently, she addressed the Womens' Interfaith Network in Sydney, where I caught up with her.

Amina Wadud: Thank you so much, thank you for the invitation.

Rachael Kohn: Amina, you've written that in the period following the death of the Prophet, women were active participants at all levels of community affairs, including religious. How extensive was that religious involvement, in your estimation?

Amina Wadud: Well I would like to preface the remarks by saying I'm also critiquing places where I think that there was a terrible gap in our history in terms of women's involvement. So when I say that they were actively involved at the time of the Prophet, it is because in his lifetime, and immediately after his lifetime, there was an infusion of these new ideas, ideas that had been transmitted to the revelation of the Qur'an, and embodied by the Prophet's own behaviour, and women also were embodying this infusion from this set of divine revelation in their lives.

So there weren't the same kind of direct references to the Qur'an, nor did the explicit process of textual analysis, or tafsir, really take root until sort of the next generation. At that time, we do see a shift in terms of women's full participation at the public level as well as at the level of sort of production of knowledge or at the intellectual level. Women were more or less reduced to their role in transmitting hadith, that is reports on what the Prophet said, but they were not commentators on the Qur'an, they did not make contributions in the areas of, say, philosophy, or even in terms of a Islamic mysticism or spirituality for a couple of centuries, and what happens now when we look back over our intellectual history, is that we experience a consensus that the Qur'an is the most important thing to whatever is Islam and what it means to be Muslim and have a relationship of surrender to God.

But we don't have a record of women's responses to that text tracing back for most of the 1400 years. I mean after about 1300 years we start to have a record. So what I'm proposing is that there was a simultaneous infusion of ideas that we would like to know what women think about those ideas, but we don't have a written record. They did think, they did read, they did memorise the Qur'an, they did reflect it in their lives, but we don't have a written record to the same extent as today we're looking back at the corpus of material defining our understanding of the Qur'an.

Rachael Kohn: Well you've certainly reactivated an interest both in women generally and also in your own life, to become more active in a leadership role in Islam and that was particularly so, very well reported in 2005 when you first led a mixed congregation of about 60 men and 40 women in Friday prayers. But you did it in a church in Manhattan, St John the Divine on the Upper West Side. Why there?

Amina Wadud: In the effort to find a physical location the organisers started with a religiously neutral place, a gallery, and the gallery received a bomb threat three or four days before the prayer was already slated to happen, and in searching for another place, they took access to a meeting hall, a large meeting hall and a church. So the fact that in America we use our religious buildings for community activity, interfaith and secular activity, programs for children, soup kitchens, these are not necessarily saying that there's a kind of crossover in faith, but people have sort of pointed at this as if that's what was going on, but actually we're just graciously given the use of a very wide hall in that church in order to be able to perform. There are no icons there, there are no crosses, particularly when we were meeting, so there was actually nothing except that that particular church happens to have some very large galleries that they made accessible to us.

Rachael Kohn: And were any mosques approached?

Amina Wadud: I believe that they were attempting to have this happen in a mosque before they came to the idea of doing it in a gallery, but they were declined by the three that they asked, I believe they asked three, and they were refused.

Rachael Kohn: And when you say 'they', I think you're talking about the Women's Freedom Tour, Muslim Wake-Up, and the Progressive Muslim Union of North America, I think these were three organisations involved. Can you tell me about them? I mean what are they, do they still exist?

Amina Wadud: Yes, they exist with the same change and configurations that really happens to non-government, or non-profit organisation, and they are all reflections of what I could say, although I'm not a member of the youth movement, of articulating Islam in America in terms that do not necessarily reify any one of the many cultures that have come to America, that continue to practice, as well as obviously members of the American culture that have also adopted Islam as their faith choice. And so these movements or organisations are still involved in different aspects of what it means to be Muslim in America today, and they were particularly keen to be able to come together to deal with the issue of women and gender space in the context of the mosque in the sign of worship.

Rachael Kohn: In your book, *Qur'an and Woman: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* which was published a little over ten years ago, you contend that the original language of the Qur'an is free from gender bias and prejudice. What do you mean by that?

Amina Wadud: Well first of all, let me just say that *Qur'an and Woman* was first published in 1992. The present edition that came from Oxford University Press is about ten years ago, so the book is actually closer to being 20 years old. And I don't actually say that the language does not have gender bias. Arabic language is very gender stratified, because everything has to be either male or female. What I say is that the divine message does not sustain either the gender stratification of the language or of the Arab culture or of patriarchal culture, but rather

having been revealed in a patriarchal context, it often responds to that context, sometimes with silence, sometimes with tacit approval, and at the same time, has this very clear egalitarian thrust. It was actually revolutionary at its time, but that those cultures that received this text and continue to practice Islam, did not follow through to the same extent at which that trajectory was first presented. So what we're trying to do at this time is actually to re-ignite that original sort of divine thrust for equality and push it forward into the future according to the realities of our current situation and hopefully beneficial to future generations as well.

Rachael Kohn: Amina, you delivered a sermon in Capetown, South Africa, called 'Islam as Engaged Surrender'. What did you mean by 'engaged surrender?' because I know that engaged Buddhism, for example, it's a term that has been used to be a reformist stream of thought in Buddhism. How do you use it?

Amina Wadud: Engaged surrender actually has to do with an attempt to translate the word 'Islam' itself in ways that indicates that there is simultaneously a conscious act to surrender your will to the will of God, and that the will of God is in fact that will which constructs the order of the entire universe. So to consciously surrender to the order of the universe is a sort of ultimate expression of Islam and not simply the ethnic or the historical articulation of it. So actually engaged surrender is sort of my translation of the word 'Islam' in a much more conscientious way. I don't like the word 'submission', because it seems as if we don't have any conscious responsibility with regards to it, but actually you have to consciously surrender to God, you have to do so with a certain amount of awareness and volition.

Rachael Kohn: Well that sermon and no doubt the one more recently 2005 prompted a big reaction from Muslim leaders, particularly men of course. They accused you of being an enemy of Islam, or being heretical. Has that position changed in any way? I mean have you also had support from Muslim leaders?

Amina Wadud: Yes, I have a mixture of support and rejection, and I don't focus my attention on the objections that people launch to the point where I become apologetic or reactionary. Instead I focus my attention on being able to continually present ideas about revisiting the Islamic world view in a way that is congruent with the realities that we experience in the world today, which is pluralism, human rights, equality, and justice in very different terms than maybe at other times in history, so I don't focus my attention on the opposition so much. I know that it's there, they don't invite me to give presentations or read my work, and so I actually go to the places where I am invited or to discuss with people who are reading my work, and the people who are reading my work are 95% actually in agreement, because even those people who are in opposition to my work when they read the work they realise it is a lot more conservative than people actually try to make it out to be, it's not at all heretical, in fact I follow very strictly the rules of interpretive science with regard to my textual analysis. So the actual work that I have written gets less approval than the supposition that somehow I'm outside of Islam because I believe that women and men are equal. So I don't focus my attention on people who misinterpret what I'm doing, because they haven't taken the time to really bother and read what it is that I have actually produced.

Rachael Kohn: Well you have an illustrious academic background, an MA in Near Eastern Studies and a PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan, you also studied in Cairo, Qur'anic Studies and Advanced Arabic. What started you on this almost

mountain, climbing a mountain, of textual analysis and historical understanding of a tradition which in the '70s, when you started, was not well understood in the West?

Amina Wadud: Well what started me is becoming a member of the religion of Islam by my own choice, and encountering things that were practiced that seemed to me to indicate that somehow there was a different status of humanity for women than there was as a status for men. And I found that incongruent with my notion of God. But because of my love of the Qur'an itself, which was really the main instrument in my full embrace and surrender to Islam. I decided that I would do my research focusing only on the Qur'an, and it was interestingly enough, a novel thought and a revolutionary position with regard to women and the rest is sort of history.

But I didn't start because I was trying to ignite some type of a movement, I actually started because I was trying to understand certain things, and took advantage of the location that I had in graduate school in order to focus my research on a Qur'anic analysis that was inclusive of a gender perspective, and the next, people said, 'Wow, that seems like a really important idea'. But I didn't do it because I thought people would find an important idea, I really did it because I wanted to understand better for myself, and it just proved to be useful for a lot of other people as well.

Rachael Kohn: Well what prompted you to convert to Islam, because your father was a Methodist Minister and I think the Methodist church was one of the first ones to ordain women, certainly here in Australia. So women were enjoying a sort of rising sense of equality in the Christian faith. So why did you then join a faith in which it would be an uphill battle?

Amina Wadud: I definitely did not join an uphill battle. I began reading about Islam in my teens, and I was very interested and pursued other information by actually going to communities of Muslims who basically thought that well if I dressed the way I dressed, because I already wore long clothes and covered my hair, if I dressed the way I dress, and I'm interested, that I should actually become Muslim. I didn't even realise when I made that declaration on Thanksgiving Day in 1972 that I would be as overwhelmed by the vision of the world that I began to understand, the more that I read, and particularly in terms of my reading of the Qur'an. In a way I was just seeking, in fact I had already been a Buddhist, and practiced - I lived in a Buddhist ashram for a year. I was seeking my vision and experience of the harmony of the universe, and what has happened is that I've actually had that vision and found it in Islam.

Rachael Kohn: And is it also a connection to your mother, who I believe has Berber origins?

Amina Wadud: Well I only learned actually after my mother had been dead for quite a number of years, almost ten years, that my slave ancestors on my mother's side were Muslim, but like other African Americans who have origins in Africa, we don't always know what our background is and Islam did not survive slavery. I just found it very curious because in a way it was like I was coming home, coming back to something that was already in my blood, but I came with my mind and my heart, so now all of them are together, the mind, the heart and the blood, all speak to the same trajectory.

Rachael Kohn: Well one of the feminist issues in Islam is all about covering, and covering your head and not long ago I spoke to Mona Eltahawy who doesn't cover her head and still

proudly asserts she's a Muslim. How important is that issue for you? What are your views on it, because of course you do cover your hair?

Amina Wadud: Well I have for a few decades in public spaces said that covering the hair is not necessary. I don't believe it is a religious mandate. I do believe it's a reflection of the politics of discourse at our time, and that also influences me to a certain extent in terms of my choice, but because I also chose to cover before I was Muslim, I'm also inspired by the very experience of my ancestors who were deprived of the option to be able to conceal any part of their body under the slave auction.

So it was a kind of reclaiming of my own bodily integrity as an African American woman that led me to choose certain forms of dress and being a Muslim it sort of went to sort of Islamic or Muslim styles, but I don't think that it is necessary as far as religious requirements go, nor do I think it is as essential as people have tended to make it. And I think that we have a displaced amount of energy focusing on dress as if we can resolve all issues that way, and that there have been Muslim women who are choosing not to cover and Muslim women who are choosing to cover, and Muslim who are forced to cover and Muslim women who are forced to uncover in all situations that we've experienced throughout our history, and what I think is more important is that we sort of come to an understanding of what is our perspective of regard to our engage the window with God. Do we see that that dress is a reflection and that therefore we should support the freedom of a person to see that, do we see that as not significant and therefore we move on to other issues that may be important, or do we see that it has become a deterrent in some way? So I think that it is multi-faceted and sometimes we tend to look at it as either wearing or not wearing is the bottom line. But I've actually written a line in my book and that is that the veil of coercion and the veil of choice look exactly the same. You can't tell the motivation of a Muslim woman because you see what she's wearing, so I think we need to engage a little bit more with the Muslim woman as a full person, and not just in terms of what she's wearing.

Rachael Kohn: Amina, we've seen the ordination of women, a very slow process in the Christian church and also in the Jewish tradition, do you see that in your life for Islam?

Amina Wadud: Well because we don't have a priestly class, and therefore there is no process of ordination. All the things that have kept women from being able to fulfil the full participation in various roles, like leading prayer, or the heads of institutions, is really based on a complex number of cultural and historical and political variables in different places. But if you look at a place like Indonesia for example, where the Chief Judge, the one who coordinates other judges, is a woman. Right across the water from Malaysia who says that women can't be judges in the Sharia courts.

It simply means that we have a long way to go in order to be able to really place this reality that we were all created by God to be agents, that there's no distinction with regard to that in our creation, that our cultures and our histories have caused us to kind of reify the patriarchal notion of social order and therefore we have sometimes marginalised women and women's contributions, and their valuable perspectives, and we need to move in a way to be able to eradicate that inconsistency with a divine trajectory. But we don't have an issue of ordination but we obviously have codified some equal behaviours and considered it part of our law, and I am actually actively involved with other women and also other men, in terms of reforming the law and rethinking the possibilities that have been proposed over the last 1400 years or so.

Rachael Kohn: And is this happening mainly in America or is it happening worldwide in pockets of reformist - ?

Amina Wadud: It has to less in America than it is in other places because we don't have the Sharia courts in America. So we may have maybe a disproportionate number of sort of intellectuals, but as far as actual reform going on, actual reformers going on in places where people are actually living is large minorities of Muslims or majority Muslims. There's much more going on in Indonesia in terms of reform than has ever been going on in the United States.

So America offers us certain other freedoms in terms of our citizenship rights, so we can actually propose certain ideas without having to worry about threat of death. But we don't have the impetus, the population, or even the expertise in order to be able to actually effect that kind of reforms, that I see that are going on especially with regard to Islam and women in places where Muslim women have been active for a long time, so I'm not really linking it to America, I'm just linking that as my own home and my own culture, because that's where I was born, but most of the work that I have done actually finds much more useful when I come outside of the United States for now.

Rachael Kohn: Do you continue to lead Friday prayers?

Amina Wadud: If I am invited and I feel comfortable with the situation, yes. But it's just not a media sensation, but I only do it if I'm invited, it's not a movement to do that. I also only do it if I'm comfortable, if I feel the situation is not comfortable for me because there's just too much emphasis on certain I think tangential things, then I will decline.

Rachael Kohn: And how about here in Australia? I understand you have a busy schedule. Will you be addressing a meeting with Muslim community organisations here?

Amina Wadud: I've actually already met with several Muslim organisations and/or members of the Muslim community in different ways. I taught an intensive workshop with the Islamic Women's Council of Victoria, there were women who were working on issues like domestic violence and sometimes they're told they can't work on that issue because it's against Islam. So I work with them in terms of looking at the framework for the actions that they're already performing. I'll meet certain other members of the community, in some of the other cities that I will visit, but I'm actually here as a joint project, as a visiting professor at Melbourne University and with the American Embassy as a guest lecturer, and that's brought me to several cities. So the goal once again is not to try to disrupt what's going on in the communities here in Australia but actually to learn from them and to participate with them in terms of their greater act of engaged surrender. So I'm not a guest of a Muslim organisation per se, I just have had certain opportunities to work with them.

Rachael Kohn: Well thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you today. I know it's a very busy schedule for you, and it's been a great honour for me. Thank you so much.

Amina Wadud: Thanks so much for having me.

Rachael Kohn: Amina Wadud is a visiting Professor at the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Her latest book is *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. You can find details on our website.

One Muslim woman reformer who's transformed the lives of girls and women across Afghanistan did it through changing their education. She's Sakeena Jacoobi.

Sakeena Jacoobi: Afghanistan has a system of rote memorisation and I know that even when I went to school, until 4th grade you do not know how to read because if somebody pointed to you something, you could not read because it was just by rote memorisation. And I know that if you really want to encourage political thinking you must change the method of teaching, and that was it. So I wrote several manual, a teacher guide and to teach student centred technique, and since then I start training teacher.

Rachael Kohn: That's the remarkable Sakeena Jacoobi, the Afghan woman and biomedical researcher, who's transformed the lives of her people through her underground girls' schools. She told her story to me and we'll hear it later in the year.

Ida Lichter

is the author of *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices Against Oppression* (Prometheus, 2009)

Amina Wadud

is an Islamic scholar and feminist and author of *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oneworld, 2006). She has recently been a visiting professor at the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.