

The first sermon delivered by a woman in a Cape Town mosque provoked an outcry from certain quarters.

TAHIRA JOYNER argues the case against the fundamentalist position.

# 'Shadow side' of Islam

**H**ISTORY was made on 12 August when Claremont Main Road Mosque invited Amina Wadud-Muhsin, an Islamic theologian at Virginia University and author of *Qur'an and Women*, to deliver the weekly sermon – the first woman to be invited to do so. However, the response from some sections of the Muslim community was venomous.

The imam of the mosque received death threats and a newly formed body, calling itself the Forum of Muslim Theologians and backed by prominent members of the long-established Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), condemned the invitation.

Yet Imam Rashied Omar has defended the decision to invite Wadud-Muhsin's contribution on the basis that it was taken by the mosque's board and congregation "as part of our ethos to campaign for the improvement of the position of women in Islam".

Serious investigation reveals that it is the approach of Imam Omar and his congregation, rather than the fulminations of the so-called Forum of Muslim Theologians, that is in tune with the original spirit of Islam and its scripture, the Qur'an. In essence, it seems that the Qur'an had the potential of being interpreted to support women's rights, but that prevailing patriarchal norms and structures disallowed this.

The historical exclusion of women from the priesthood and the domination of women by men within the family seem to be the inevitable consequences of a religion in which maleness is the only symbol for divinity and all spiritual authority rests with men.

It is, in fact, extremely ironic that Allah – the Muslim name for God – has always been referred to and revered as a male force, for the two attributes most closely associated with Allah are mercy and compassion, both of which are derived from the word *rahim*, a feminine root noun meaning "womb".

Thus the primary metaphor for Allah is not male. Rather it is maternal. And this connection of the divine with the idea of the womb holds another important idea: that we

exist in the natural world, in the whole of nature, in the same way as an unborn child exists within the womb of its mother. Abuse of nature is therefore tantamount to abuse of Allah.

Despite this primary identification of Allah with the feminine, and despite the obvious fact that Allah as Supreme Being must be beyond gender, must transcend the splitting of being into male and female, Islam has always imaged God as a male force, and has portrayed the female as inferior.

In fact, the Qur'an not only states that women are inferior to men but endorses violence against us. Surah 4:34 reads: "Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which Allah has bestowed more abundantly on the former than the latter ... and as for those women whose ill-will you have reason to fear, admonish them (first); then leave them alone in bed; then beat them; and if thereupon they pay you heed, do not seek to harm them."

Nature has suffered the same fate. Flying in the face of the Qur'anic challenge to humanity to be caretakers of Mother Earth, is the imaging within the Islamic tradition of men as the dominators of creation. Surah 14:32-3 reads: "It is Allah who ... has made the rivers subservient to you; and has made the sun and the moon, both of them constant upon their courses, subservient to you; and has made the night and the day subservient to you."

As far as the relation between men and women is concerned, this ideology of domination perpetuates from generation to generation a grotesque imbalance. The result is visible for all to see in the rising incidence of violence against women – rape, assault, battery, emotional abuse. Less visible but equally grave is the markedly inferior and often profoundly self-hating way in which Muslim women learn from their leaders and teachers to perceive themselves.

The situation is as serious on the ecological level. The planet is groaning under the violence done by the ideology of domination. The hole in the ozone layer, global warming, the destruction of forests, escalating

pollution, and so on all spring from the same disastrous attitude.

Yet only a handful of imams across the land are challenging the community about the Qur'anic teaching that human beings are intended to be caretakers of the earth. Only a handful are open to the idea that the use of exclusively male-defined imagery for the divine, and the role misogynist symbols and stories play in perpetuating the institutionalised sexism of Islam, urgently needs to be critiqued.

In this context, the work of Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan is particularly relevant. Gilligan has shown that, as the traditional caretakers, women tend to identify with others, value other people's feelings, and base moral codes on the good of the entire group. Eco-feminists argue that these female values, which recognise and support the essential inter-connectedness of life, offer the best hope for achieving the transformation of consciousness necessary for the survival of the planet.

In the light of all this, it is vital that we recognise how the fundamentalist backlash in response to Wadud-Muhsin's sermon reflects the shadow side of Islam. This shadow side – essentially a lack of consciousness – is not only doing great harm to human beings, it is also threatening the very planet.

We need to open up our understanding of the divine to include the female and the natural world on which we depend. In the words of Jungian analyst Christine Downing: "To be fed only male images of the divine is to be badly malnourished. We are starved for images which recognise the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness and nurturing power of female energy."

On a political level, women – and their male allies – need to ensure that the struggle for female liberation is not confined to secular space. It needs to be taken into the mosques, the temples and the churches. Much work has already been done in these domains. But much remains. ■

*Tahira Joyner holds an honours degree in religious studies.*