(In the name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful)

THE

STATUS OF WOMAN IN ISLAM

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A lecture delivered at Bishop James’ Sanctuary, Knightsbridge, London

As we all know why we are assembled here this evening I will, without wasting any time in preliminaries, proceed at once to my subject. This is a Church, and the audience is supposed to consist of Christians. I am addressing a Christian audience as a Muslim on the subject of the status given to women by Islam. Now, as we are logical beings, things are understandable to us only in their relation to others. I would, therefore, ask the audience to recall to their minds the Biblical account of the Fall of Man, since the whole superstructure of Christian Theology is based on this theory. With all our hostility to Saint Paul and his doctrines, we Muslims give him the credit of being consistent when he wrote—“Adam was not deceived, but
woman being deceived was in the transgression.” Consistent, too, were the Fathers of the Medæval Church, when they hurled anathemas at woman, some calling her “the organ of the Devil,” others describing her as “the instrument which the Devil uses to gain possession of our souls.” However ludicrous these notions may appear to us of the twentieth century, they are certainly quite in keeping with the theory of the Fall of Adam, as enunciated by Christianity.

We Muslims also believe in a theory of the Fall of Adam, and here is our theory, in the words of the Holy Qur’an:

And We said, O Adam, dwell you and your wife in the garden, and eat from it a plenteous food wherever you wish, and not approach this tree, for then you will be of the unjust; but the Devil made them both fall from it, and caused them to depart from that state in which they were.¹

Hence, it will be seen that the Islamic theory is that Adam and Eve were simultaneously and equally deceived by the Devil.

¹ 2: 35, 36.
In this connection, I may state that the Qur'an repudiates the idea of woman being created from the rib of man. The chapter entitled "The Women" begins with the words:

O people, be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, Who created you from a single being, and created its mate of the same essence.

The point is made clearer still elsewhere by the Qur'anic verse:

And Allah has made wives for you from among yourselves.¹

This lays down that our wives are of the same kind and essence as ourselves. No clearer announcement of the equality of the sexes, from the theological point of view, has ever been made.

Coming to the social position of woman, let us once more refer to the Bible. "Neither was the Man created for the Woman, but the Woman for the Man," are the words we read in the
New Testament. Again, "Let the Woman learn in silence, with all subjection, for I suffer not," says St. Paul, "a woman to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." In contrast to these views on the rights of woman as against those of man, we have the following in our Scripture, al-Qur'an: "And they (i.e. women) have rights similar to those against them in a just manner," 1 while the interdependence of man and woman is still more clearly asserted in the words: "They (your wives) are a garment for you, just as you are a garment for them." 2 What a beautiful metaphor is this! As garments hide our nakedness and such physical defects as need covering, so do husband and wife hide the animal weaknesses each of the other. Unfortunately the civilized man of modern times does not seem to realize that sexual passion in man is only the expression of the animal that is in him, and that the more it is hidden and controlled, the better it is for his dignity as a rational being. Again, as our clothes give comfort to the body, so do husbands

1. 2: 228. 2. 2: 187.
and wives find comfort in each other's company; and, lastly, the garment is the grace, the beauty and the embellishment of the body; so, too, are wives and husbands, the one to the other.

"The treasures of the deep are not so precious as are the concealed comforts of a man, locked up in a woman's heart," sang a renowned English poet, and I make bold to say that this sentiment is only an echo of the Qur'an, and is in no way inspired by the Bible, for it is the Qur'an that says:

And one of His (God's) signs is that He has created wives for you from your own species, that ye may be comforted with them, and has put love and tenderness between you.¹

Such is the ideal of wifelhood in Islam, and I have nowhere found a higher conception of the mutual relations of man and woman based upon love, affection and equality.

In this connection I cannot resist the temptation of quoting some sayings of our Prophet, that is, the Prophet Muhammad. He says:

Women are the twin halves of men.

¹. 30: 21.
God commands us to treat women well, for they are our mothers, daughters and aunts.

The world and all things in the world are valuable, but the most valuable thing in the world is a virtuous woman.

A Muslim must not hate his wife, and if he be displeased with one bad quality in her, then let him be pleased with another which is good.

A virtuous wife is a man's best treasure.

He is the most perfect Muslim whose disposition is best; and the best of you are they who are best disposed to their wives.

Fear God in regard to the treatment of your wives, for verily they are your helpers. You have taken them on the security of God, and made them lawful by the words of God.

I now come to the legal rights of women. Here, again, I say, without any fear of contradiction, that woman, as woman, owes not a single right, not a single privilege, to Jesus, the Christ. It would not have mattered to woman if he had never been born, for Jesus had not a word to say on the question of the "Rights
of Woman.” Rather his example is one of hatred and horror for womanhood; indeed, he could not afford to please his own mother. However much the modern Church may claim that the rights enjoyed by the women of to-day are an evolution of the spirit of Jesus, the idea is gradually gaining ground that it is the spirit of the pagan laws that has been at work behind them. And who knows if it is not the influence of the laws of Muhammad working indirectly on the social mind? Now, the rules laid down by the Qur’an in the matter of the legal rights of woman are clear and comprehensive, and a decided improvement on any other contemporary system. The Qur’an says:

Men shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, and women shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, whether there is a little or much of it.¹

While listening to these words of the Qur’an, Christian men and women of England would do well to remember that the recognition

¹. 4:7.
of the right of woman to property is a comparatively recent phenomenon in this country, whereas Muslim women have been enjoying such a right for the last 1,400 years. A woman is a distinct individuality in Islam, whether in her parents' house or in the house of her husband. She has her distinct personal name, and she is known by that name everywhere. On her marriage she retains her share of inheritance in the property of her parents, while she acquires an additional right of inheritance in the property of her husband. There is, in Islam, no occasion for a Miss Eleanor Rathbone to fulminate in the Parliament against husbands willing away their property to the total deprivation of their wives. I should advise my audience to read, in this connection, the views of Mr. Pierre Crabites who was appointed Judge by President Taft in the year 1911, to represent the U.S.A. on the Mixed Tribunals of Cairo, Egypt. These views were expressed in an article: "Things Mahomed did for Women."

He says:

When all is said and done, however, nothing astonished me more than to have the proof driven home to me
that before 632 of the Christian Era, the Prophet of Islam had accomplished more to safeguard the property rights of the wives of his land than the legislature of Louisiana has yet done for her who bears my name... Mahomed's outstanding contribution to the cause of woman resides in the property rights that he conferred on the wives of his people. The juridical status of a wife, if so technical a term may he pardoned, is exactly the same as that of a husband. The Moslem spouse, in so far as her property is concerned, is as free as a bird. The Law permits her to do with her financial assets whatever she pleases without consulting her consort.... It is therefore useless to tell me that the Moslem woman is nothing but a human lacteal machine, that her soul is not her own, and that man is her lord and master. I am not dealing with social conditions; I am drawing a picture of the work of a great legislator, and of the legal edifice constructed by him. But if I were pressed too hard, I should not fear to face the issue on this score of woman's effective power. I should begin by challenging the right of any man or woman to cast the first stone, unless he or she could demonstrate that the wives of his or her state enjoy legal prerogatives which measure up to those of the hidden flowers of Islam. I think that I should be perfectly justified in applying such a rule. I am afraid that it would somewhat seriously restrict the quota of eligibles but that is not my fault. I should then invite
those who thus passed Ellis Island, to come to my court. There I should probably be able to show them veiled sisters with tattooed arms, rings in their noses and fly-covered children on their shoulders, without lawyer or friend, standing before a judge or counsel and defending their rights with an assurance, a volubility and a mastery that would be sure to arouse admiration. If this spectacle should still leave my inquirers unconvinced, I should ask them to find out, from somebody or through someone in whom they had confidence, just who first kindled in Egypt the spark that is now threatening England, who has kept the flame aglow, and who are the blindest, the most fearless and the most intractable foes to any kind of compromise. To such a query there could be but one answer. It is that, for good or for evil, the Moslem woman is a driving force which was fashioned by a master mind. In a word, rights beget responsibility, responsibility engenders leadership, and leadership always asserts itself. It was Mahomed who fixed with unerring discernment the property rights of the married women of his land. It was he who gave them a legal personality of their own. He thus put the sceptre within their grasp.¹

I need not waste any time in pleading the case of Divorce to you; since it is a recognized necessity in every country in these days. If the Church has held to the indissolubility of

the marriage tie, modern Russia has gone to the other extreme of Divorce at will, while even the orthodox Christians are not ashamed, in these days, of discussing companionate marriages. Islam judiciously holds the balance between the two. There is a necessary margin for Divorce in Islamic law, but the conditions are so hard as to make it a rare happening. If the Divorce takes place through the fault of the husband, the wife is to receive the promised sum of dowry settled upon her at the time of the marriage. If, however, the wife is to blame in the matter, she forfeits her claim to the dowry-money. The Prophet of Islam spoke the final word on the attitude of Islam towards Divorce when he declared—"Of all the permissible things Divorce is the most disliked by God." This observation is certainly more judicious and legist-like than the one ascribed to Jesus. Judge Crabites very rightly remarks: "The Muslim looks upon marriage solely as a matter of contract, the terms of which depend, within very wide limits, on the will of the
parties.” This statement is as true of the commencement of the transaction as of its end.

Let us now pass on to the question that has given rise to the greatest misapprehension in the European mind—I mean the question of Polygamy. But before I proceed to discuss it—and in that I have to be very brief in view of the shortness of the time at our disposal—I must remind my Christian friends that so erudite a Biblical student as Martin Luther had officially advised Philip of Hesse that the New Testament did not prohibit polygamy, and that such pious Christians as Valentinianus Constantius, Charlemagne, Frederic Barbarossa and many others like them had a plurality of wives. Above all, can we forget the conduct of the great king who laid the foundations of the Anglican Church? The challenge of the eminent European philosopher, Schopenhauer, has not, as yet, been replied to by any Christian layman or Church dignitary. He says:

There is no use arguing about polygamy; it must be taken as de facto existing everywhere, and the only question is how to regulate it.
Let us place the Islamic permission of polygamy in the background thus prepared. In Islam it is only a permission and not an injunction; indeed, it is remarkable that the verse containing this permission both begins and ends with a big ‘‘if.’’ It reads:

And if you feel you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you feel that you cannot do justice between them, then marry only one.

It is quite clear that the Qur’an gives the rule as monogamy, and that polygamy is an exception—an exception arising out of the existence of numerous orphans to be looked after by society, i.e. where widows with their children are to be provided for. Such a situation presented itself to the Muslims of the Prophet’s days when a very large number of Muslims fell on the field of battle to vindicate their rights of religious freedom. But even in this exceptional case only those persons are allowed to marry more than one wife who have the extraordinary capacity of dealing equally with all.

1. 4: 3.
There are several misconceptions unfortunately lurking in the Western mind regarding this measure of polygamy allowed by Islam. The Qur'anic permission is taken for an injunction, and it is believed that every Muslim is bound to marry a number of wives. This is wrong. A monogamous Muslim is as much a Muslim as a monogamous Christian is considered to be a Christian. The difference lies in this, that whereas Islam says that if under certain conditions a Muslim is legitimately polygamous he remains a Muslim, but in no case can he be allowed to keep a single mistress, Christians say that if a Christian formally marries more than one woman, he no longer remains a Christian, but if he keeps 200 mistresses, and that openly, he still remains untouched by the Christian law of the present day!

It is also believed by the people of the West that this polygamy is a matter of force—as if a Muslim goes to and fro in the earth laying hold of any woman that comes his way, and marrying her willynilly. Misconception could.
hardly go further. These people should know that Muslim marriage is, in all cases, a matter of free contract between the parties. So in Islamic polygamy the woman is as much responsible as the man.

There is, moreover, another aspect of the question. Taking into consideration the fact that a Muslim marriage is only a civil contract between the two parties—of course, for life—the woman who is going to be married as the first wife of a man, can very easily impose the condition that in case of the man's marrying a second wife, the marriage tie shall automatically be dissolved. So if Islam permits polygamy to save a society from adultery and the curse of "street girls," "other women," "mistresses" and "war-babies," it has the most effective control possible of the situation in the contractual character of its marriage. It may interest my hearers to learn that in India—the country which is mainly responsible for the preaching activities of Islam in these days—the percentage of polygamous marriages amongst the Muslims
is not more than three or four per thousand—and, remember, there are no Hyde Park or Piccadilly scenes in India. A Muslim is really monogamous, when he is monogamous. The "other woman" business is inconceivable in Islamic society.

Now, I must say a few words with regard to the spiritual rights of woman in Islam. It is a monstrous lie to assert that Islam recognizes no soul in woman. As I have already pointed out, Islam declares that man and woman both came from the same source; so that both must possess the same quality of soul. But let the Qur'an speak in reply to this libel against Islam:

Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men, and the fasting women, and the men who guard their private parts, and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much, and the women who remember Allah much—Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward.¹

¹ 1. 33:35.
Muhammad knew, perhaps, what St. Paul had said about women, so he emphatically declared: “Do not prevent your women from coming to the Mosque.” So great was the liberty of women in the Mosque, that once, when the great Caliph, Umar was delivering his sermon in the Mosque, an ordinary woman suddenly rose to a point of order. The mighty Caliph humbly submitted himself to the correction and observed: “The women of Madina understand the Qur’an better than ‘Umar.” I do not know if the spiritual rights of women can well go further. There have been women saints in Islam—persons to whom God spoke. There is a whole chapter devoted in the Qur’an to the Lady Mary, the mother of Jesus, to whom as well as to the mother of Moses, God used to speak, according to Muslim belief. The great saint Rabi’a is an inspiring force in the Muslim world—and there have been many other women like her in the history of Islam.

It is a thousand pities that when so much blood has been shed in Europe to vindicate the
sanctity of man's rights to things material, the jealousy for the sanctity of womanhood is regarded, almost humorously, as the "cave man spirit," and its whole culture has been allowed to be based on erotic thoughts and imaginations. As contrasted with this state of things, Islam is emphatically anti-phallic. With all corruption and degradation which has crept into it in these latter days it has throughout preserved this spirit because it knows that real honour to woman consists in this spirit, and not in a few items of so-called liberty with regard to physical movements. Ballroom dancing, Parisian nudities, and, most dangerous of all, promiscuous intermingling of the sexes, are considered hateful in the Islamic conception of social life, since they are regarded as man's cunning devices for exploiting the sexual weakness in women, and, indeed, a most treacherous outrage on womanhood. Islam believes in a certain amount of control of man's movements—because, it is, after all, the machinations of man which is at the bottom of all
these deceptions. The Qur'an lays down:—

O you who believe, do not enter homes other than your own homes, until you have asked permission, and saluted their intimates. This is better for you that you may be mindful.¹

Again:

Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; surely Allah is aware of what they do.²

After this there is a corresponding warning to women, and then:

Say to the believing women that they cast down their looks, and guard their private parts, and not display their ornament except what appears thereof, and let them wear head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their beauty except to their husbands, or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, or their sons, or the sons of their husbands, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters; sons, or their women . . . . . or the male servants not having any need of women, or the children not having any knowledge of what is hidden of women.³

It is quite patent that in all these precautions the attitude of distrust is always towards

the men. These injunctions do not in the least insist on total seclusion, rather do they assume a condition of society in which women move about freely. And, as a matter of fact, the Muslim women do move about freely — of course decently dressed, and not with "my young man"— excepting in the cities and in highly aristocratic families. In these families, the idea is not at all the confinement of woman. The women themselves regard it as a sign of aristocracy thus to remain hidden. Of course, in all Muslim families there is a separate quarter for women, as I have pointed out, and the reason for its existence has also been explained. This reserved quarter, I must make it clear, contains not only the wife but also the wives of near relatives, widows of the family, in the broader sense, say, mother, aunt, etc.— Eastern families live mostly in joint families—and the unmarried girls, one's own and those of the poorer relatives. With regard to its character, Von Hammer has very correctly said:

The Harem is a Sanctuary; it is prohibited to the
stranger—not because women are considered unworthy of confidence, but on account of the sacredness with which custom and manners invest them.

Speaking of the position of the wife in a harem, John Devenport says:

So far from the harem being a prison to the woman, it is a place of liberty, where the husband himself is treated as an interloper. The moment his foot passes the threshold, everything reminds him that he is no longer Lord and Master; children, servants and all look to the principal lady; in short she is paramount; when she is in good humour, everything goes on well, and when she is in a bad humour, nothing goes right.

Thus the Islamic system of the segregation of the sexes aims at a truer liberty and dignity for womanhood. Owing to her motherhood and the tremendous responsibility which it involves, she is made an object of adoration rather than a toy, which, after all, is, generally speaking, her position in Europe. It is not correct to say that women are kept in subjection in Islam, but rather that, in the enjoyment of true liberty, Muslim men and women voluntarily subject themselves to certain restrictions.
In conclusion, I make bold to say that in the pursuit of its own conception of liberty, modern Europe, though calling itself Christian, is, in practice, not far from re-enacting those nauseating scenes of pagan times to which Christianity is supposed to have put an end. Are not the histories of Athens, Pompeii and Rome repeating themselves to-day in London, Paris, New York and Berlin? Let Christianity pause and think. The points raised by Mr. Justice McCardie show the direction whither affairs in Europe are drifting. I may tell you that Nature will never forget to take its revenge, and Christian Europe is positively heading towards the doom which overtook the pagan nations of old. Islam surely cannot be a party to this kind of destructive libertinism. It has its own ideals. Let Europe remain contented with the production of a few Amy Johnsons and Greta Garbos. In its glorious days Islam also had produced noted women possessing, perhaps, finer traits of human nature and proving more useful members of society. But its chief interest has
always lain elsewhere. While Europe has remained contented with the worship of Mary, Islam's ambition has been to produce lesser or greater Marys in every age, and, as a matter of fact, this is what it has been doing through the ages. To me it seems that the cause of Europe's inability to appreciate the Islamic ideal of womanhood lies in its low level of spirituality, for which, perhaps, the doctrine of Atonement by Blood is responsible.

Unless, therefore, Europeans set themselves to cultivate a real spirituality, they will never see eye to eye with us in certain matters of the very highest importance which vitally affect the progressive social life of humanity. Let us see what modern reform movements in Christianity can do in this respect. But the goal seems to be still very far off. A thorough overhauling of the whole religious outlook seems to be urgently necessary. May God help us!