CHAPTER 8

Personal Status Laws in Islam: Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah’s New Tafsir (Exegesis)

Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah was born in Najaf, Iraq, to a prominent religious family descendant of Imam Hassan. In Najaf, he associated with Shi’i clerics, and particularly with Baqir al-Sadr who was politically active turning the Shi’i University at Najaf into a center of political and religious opposition to the Iraqi regime. In 1966, following the repression of Iran’s ‘ulama by the Iraqi secular regime, he left Najaf to establish himself in Beirut. He focused on creating a sense of Shi’i communal identity, and formed an alliance of mutual need with Iran’s emissaries to Lebanon who provided him with financial support and revolutionary symbols to bring in the Revolution to Lebanon. He began a successful career as a preacher, teacher, writer, and social worker, and placed himself in the experience of the have-nots that later defined his philosophy. He founded the “Brotherhood,” an Islamic club for the poor residents of Nab’ah, a Beirut suburb, and promoted grassroots leadership through vigorous education, counseling, and outspoken sermons calling for an Islamic government to solve Lebanon’s social and economic problems as well as helping Palestinians in their struggle against Israel.

While using Western techniques and persuasive arguments in his criticism of the West, he vividly criticized Western involvement in Lebanon. His mastery of the Arabic language enabled him to communicate Islamic theology in a simple, clear and concise, and, at times, fundamental way, using prose as well as poetry. For example, harking on the Marxist framework, he employed the rhetoric of the oppressed against the oppressor—in his example, the oppressor was the United States and the oppressed third world countries. His call resonated well with the community. He saw oppression as a “process
of dehumanization,” raising the freedom that the Qur’an prescribes. He not only called on the ‘ulama to join the revolution under God against the tyrannical forces of the world, but also called all Arabs and Islamic peoples and, consequently, the Lebanese nation as a whole to join the revolution.

In 1972, following the death of Imam Musa el-Sadr, the Iranian Ayatollah Kho’i appointed him as his wakil (deputy) in Lebanon. He founded a large mabarrat, or charitable institution, in Beirut comprising an orphanage, a mosque, a women’s cultural center, a school, and a library and devoted his energy to expanding on the revolutionary ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini. In return, Ayatollah Khomeini named him the marji’ al-taqlid (source of tradition, imitation) and he was appointed vice president of the Central Council of the International Hizbullah in Tehran. Similarly, he grew in political significance in Lebanon, becoming President of the Lebanese Council of Hizbullah, which consisted of the Iranian ambassador, the Lebanese ‘ulama, and security strongmen responsible for clandestine operations.

Fadlallah became the spiritual al-murshid al-ruhi, an infallible guide and the most subtle promoter of the Shi’i cause in Lebanon since the 1980s. He declared that his allegiances transcended Lebanon to embrace a universal Islam, and openly declared the indebtedness of the Lebanese Shi’i to the Iranian Revolution for awakening their Islamic consciousness. He adhered to the usuli (fundamentalist) tradition of modern Shi’i; a usuli gives authoritative opinions and advice to individuals facing problems in modern circumstances. In his ijtihad to reconcile scriptures with modern times, he declared the role of women in Islam as not static, and laws regarding women were subject to change. He formulated the Islamic concepts for the new generation of Shi’i, who in turn, are now carrying Islam far from the blind tradition or adherence to historical misinterpretation. Interpretation is not absolute, but open to reinterpretation in the light of current advances in knowledge and technology.

In Dunya el-Mar’a, Fadlallah referring to verse Nisa’ verse 4:1 states that men and women share the same soul: “O mankind, fear your Lord Who created you from a single soul, and created from it its spouse, and propagated from both many men and women. Fear God in Whose name you make requests one of another, and sever not the ties of kinship. God watches well over you.” Stressing the egalitarian spirit of Islam, women and men, he argues, share the same soul and benefit from an absolute moral and spiritual equality. Weakness is inherent to both men and women as expressed in Nisa’ verse 4:28. “God is all-Knowing, All-Wise. So also God wishes to pardon you but those who pursue their passions with you to veer utterly from your path. Yet God wishes to lighten your burden, for humans were created feeble.” Furthermore, Islamic history departed from this Qur’anic