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978-0-521-89428-9 - Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought

Louise Marlow

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By bringing together and examining a diverse body of literature from the Arab and Persian worlds of the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, Louise Marlow explores the tension that existed between the traditional egalitarian ideas of early Islam and the hierarchical impulses of the classical period. The literature demonstrates that while Islam's initial orientation was markedly egalitarian in both religious and social terms, the social aspect of this egalitarianism was soon undermined in the aftermath of Islam's political success, and as hierarchical social ideas from older cultures in the Middle East were incorporated into the new polity. Although the memory of its early promise never entirely receded and remnants of the ideal survive in many parts of the tradition, social egalitarianism quickly came to be associated with political subversion and various attempts were made to dilute its influence. On account of its originality and chronological scope, Louise Marlow's book will be of use to a wide and interested readership, not only of Islamic and medieval historians, but also of scholars assessing the impact of the recent Islamic revival.

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LOUISE MARLOW

Wellesley College



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1997
 First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
 Marlow, Louise.

Hierarchy and egalitarianism in Islamic thought / Louise Marlow.
 p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization)

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 0 521 56430 1

1. Equality – Islamic countries – History. 2. Equality – Religious
 aspects – Islam. 3. Social justice – Islamic countries – History.

4. Social structure – Islamic countries – History. 5. Occupational
 prestige – Islamic countries – History. I. Title. II. Series.

HN768.Z9S66 1997

305'.0917'671–dc20 96-15400 CIP

ISBN 0 521 56430 1 hardback
 ISBN 0 521 89428 X paperback

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For my parents

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Preface

Islam is probably the most uncompromising of the world's religions in its insistence on the equality of all believers before God. In God's eyes, differences of rank and affluence are irrelevant, and all Muslims, regardless of their positions in this world, are equally capable of salvation in the next. At least in theory, this egalitarianism is extended in large part to the social plane as well. The religious and social aspects of Islamic egalitarianism are sometimes closely linked; for example, Muslims do not require the intermediacy of a priesthood in order to gain access to the divine. In other cases, the tradition draws a clear distinction between religious and social equality; thus women and slaves are regarded as the religious but not the social equals of free male believers. But among these last, Islam's egalitarianism can be said to have a social as well as a religious application. The resistance of the Islamic religious tradition to infringements of this egalitarian ideal, in its religious and social dimensions, is surely one of Islam's strongest and most universal attractions. It has probably never been more appealing to Muslims across the world than it is today, when, as many Muslims become newly conscious of their religious identity, and as immigrants (and increasingly converts) create a Muslim presence in traditionally non-Muslim areas, the insignificance attached to status, wealth and social background provides an inspiring sense of community.¹

This book sets out to explore the tension between this powerful egalitarian ideal and the forms of social differentiation that inevitably characterised Muslim societies in the classical and early medieval periods of Islamic history (I use these terms loosely to refer to the period covered roughly by the second/eighth to seventh/thirteenth centuries). In particular it examines

¹ The modern emphasis on Islamic egalitarianism is evident in the works of several modern Muslim thinkers (see for example S. Abul A'la Maududi, *Political Theory of Islam* (Lahore, 1980), pp. 35–8; *idem*, *Witnesses unto Mankind. The Purpose and Duty of the Muslim Umma* (Leicester, 1986), pp. 32–3). The distinction between theory and practice naturally remains; in the United States, in areas where the Muslim population is relatively large, socio-economic status is likely to be a factor in the process of internal stratification (cf. Y.Y. Haddad and A.T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States. A Comparative Study* (New York and Oxford, 1987), pp. 43–44).

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Muslims' varied imaginings of an ideal society, a topic to which I was first drawn as a graduate student at Princeton University and which I began to explore in my doctoral dissertation (completed at Princeton in 1987). What follows is thus a study in an aspect of Islamic utopian thought and not, I wish to emphasise, in the sociology of any particular Muslim community during the period under discussion. The social ideals that form the focus of my study are drawn from a wide range of literary materials generated over a relatively long period and over an extensive cultural–geographical area. My purpose in considering such widely differing sources is not, as may perhaps have been the case in some earlier studies of Islamic social thought, to uncover a generic sociology that might be applied to all medieval Muslim societies.² It is rather to demonstrate that the diverse social visualisations attested in classical and early medieval sources constitute several traditions of utopian thought based on a variety of historical and cultural experiences, and that these traditions intersect with each other, and again to some extent with historical realities, in ways that are intrinsically interesting. While I have drawn my materials from many parts of the classical Islamic (primarily Arabic and Persian) literary corpus, it is abundantly clear that no work of this kind can be fully comprehensive; indeed, the number of potentially relevant sources for such a project is daunting to contemplate. But I have sought to include enough materials to render the topic cohesive and, I hope, to convey to the reader some of the excitement that I have found in exploring it.

I should like to acknowledge here the assistance and encouragement that I have received from several individuals in the course of my work. My principal debt is to Keith Lewinstein, who has read this material in countless incarnations over the past eight years, has discussed its larger and smaller points with me, and has offered thoughtful suggestions at every stage; his interest and involvement have sustained me throughout my studies of Islamic thought. I should also like to express my gratitude to Michael Cook, who initially encouraged me to write this book and read an early draft of the entire manuscript; I have benefited immeasurably from his generous sharing of his insights and knowledge, and from his criticisms and suggestions. I am also indebted to Roy Mottahedeh, whose own work first stimulated my interest in the subject matter of this book and whose sensitivity to the complexities of the relationship between historical realities and literary texts I have found consistently instructive; I am grateful for his sharing of my enthusiasm for my work both during and after my years as a graduate student, and for his helpful comments on several versions of the manuscript. In addition I am extremely grateful to Patricia Crone and Wadad al-Qadi, both of whom read the manuscript with the utmost care; it has been inestimably improved as a result of their thought-

² The works to which I refer are R. Levy, *The Sociology of Islam* (London, 1931–3; 2nd edition *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge, 1957)) and G. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam, A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago, 1946).

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ful criticisms and advice. For assistance of various kinds I am also indebted to Hossein Modarressi, Cornell Fleischer, Jere Bacharach, and the late Martin Dickson and Martin Hinds. I should also like to acknowledge the practical and moral support that I have received from my colleagues in the Department of Religion at Wellesley College, especially Edward Hobbs, who has assisted me with numerous computer-related problems; in addition I am very grateful to Karen Jensen and the long-suffering staff of the Interlibrary Loan department of the Wellesley College Library. Finally I should like to thank Marigold Acland of Cambridge University Press for her unfailing attentiveness and her kindness.

The initial research for this study was supported by the American Research Institute in Turkey, the British Institute of Persian Studies, the American Institute of Iranian Studies and the Giles Whiting Foundation. I should also like to express my gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society and Wellesley College for their support of my work in its later stages.

Note on transliteration

In my transliteration of Arabic words and names, I have followed the system adopted in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, with the modifications that *q* replaces *k* and *j* replaces *dj*. My transliteration from Persian generally reflects the consonants as in Arabic, although I have substituted *v* for *w*; this modification has also been adopted in cases where Arabic terms appear in a Persian context. I have made some attempt to preserve Persian vowel sounds, such as *o* and *e*.

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------------|--|
| <i>AEIO</i> | <i>Annales de l'Institut d'Etudes Orientales</i> |
| <i>BEO</i> | <i>Bulletin d'études orientales</i> |
| <i>BSOAS</i> | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> |
| <i>EI1</i> | <i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , First Edition, Leiden 1913–1938 |
| <i>EI2</i> | <i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , Second Edition, Leiden, 1954– |
| <i>GAL</i> | C. Brockelmann, <i>Geschichte der arabischen Literatur</i> , 3 vols. and 2 supplements, Leiden 1937–1942 |
| <i>GAS</i> | F. Sezgin, <i>Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums</i> , 9 vols., Leiden 1967– |
| <i>IC</i> | <i>Islamic Culture</i> |
| <i>IJMES</i> | <i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i> |
| <i>IQ</i> | <i>Islamic Quarterly</i> |
| <i>JA</i> | <i>Journal Asiatique</i> |
| <i>JAAS</i> | <i>Journal of Asian and African Studies</i> |
| <i>JAOS</i> | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i> |
| <i>JESHO</i> | <i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i> |
| <i>JNES</i> | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> |
| <i>JRAS</i> | <i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i> |
| <i>JSAI</i> | <i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i> |
| <i>JSS</i> | <i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i> |
| <i>REI</i> | <i>Revue des études islamiques</i> |
| <i>RSO</i> | <i>Rivista degli studi orientali</i> |
| <i>SI</i> | <i>Studia Islamica</i> |
| <i>WZKM</i> | <i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</i> |
| <i>ZDMG</i> | <i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i> |