

An Introduction to the *Bihishti Zewar*

In a short time, God willing, you will . . . become a maulawi—that is, a scholar of Arabic. . . . You will achieve the rank of a learned person, and you will be able to give judicial opinions, as learned men do. You will begin to teach Arabic to girls, just as learned men do. . . . You will be granted the reward equal to that bestowed on each person to whom you have given guidance with your preaching and opinions, teaching and books.

Bihishti Zewar, Book Ten

[The Prophet Muhammad] was very gentle. . . . At night . . . he would do everything very softly, so that no one's sleep would ever be disturbed. . . . When he was happy, he lowered his gaze. What young girl would have been as modest as this?

Bihishti Zewar, Book Eight

I have for some time . . . realized that in order to manage women, it is absolutely necessary to teach them the science of religion.

Bihishti Zewar, Book One

The *Bihishti Zewar* (Heavenly ornaments), written at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been one of the most influential texts of the scripturalist reform movements characteristic of Muslim societies in the past century.¹ It strikingly represents significant changes in the themes and emphases in Muslim religious life in recent times. Most important, it illustrates a new concern for bringing mainstream Islamic teachings to women—a departure from the traditional view in which women typically were not expected to have more than a minimal acquaintance with these teachings. Women had not been regarded historically as the guardians of virtue and tradition, as, for example, they became in Europe at this time. Rather, it was men, in the public

settings of mosque, court, school, and sufi hospice, who preserved and elaborated the tradition. The text itself, therefore, is part of an important cultural transformation. It is also an excellent source for a textured, detailed presentation of the major themes of Islamic reform. Moreover, because the book is directed toward women, its examples and detail provide a rich picture of everyday domestic life and of attitudes about women.

For women to act as they should, this work argues, they must be instructed. Basic to this confidence in the power of instruction is an implicit conviction that women are essentially the same as men, neither endowed with a special nature for spiritual or moral virtue nor handicapped in any way by limitations of intellect or character. This book is interesting not only for what it does but also for what it does not do, for it makes no effort to elaborate physiological or intellectual differences between women and men. The epigraphs above make this clear. There is no need for a distinctive literature for women, for example, no notion that women are more suited for literature or poetry than for anything more intellectually demanding. As the first epigraph suggests, women are best off reading Arabic texts, as men do.² Similarly, there is no sense that women have a specific range of feminine virtues. The second epigraph emphasizes that everyone must take the Prophet as their model, that his essential characteristics must be emulated by both women and men.

Yet the goal of reform was to create a properly ordered society in which people knew their place, fulfilled their responsibilities, and received their due. We are reminded of this in the third epigraph: central to correct hierarchy is the subordination of women to the men of their family. In principle, there is no contradiction between distinctive roles based on gender, age, and status and an essential equality of nature that is taken for granted here. The reformers also call on people to recognize the hierarchy that extends beyond humans to God, whose uniqueness, *tauhid*, is not to be compromised by human self-assertion or saintly elevation. Much of the book focuses on cultivating virtues and eliminating false religious practices.

The introduction that follows first describes the historical context of both the author and the text. It then briefly discusses the legacy of the Western stereotypes about Muslim women and suggests as a more appropriate background the *shari'at* framework in which issues related to women have historically been understood. Next, it returns to the issue of the single standard newly set for women and men, assessing its implications for women and contrasting its essential egalitarianism with

contemporaneous thought about women in Victorian Britain and Hindu Bengal, as well as in modernist Islam.

The introduction next highlights a central theme of the book and of reformist thought: the high value placed on correct knowledge as a key to change. This theme reflects faith in education with a vengeance—in this perspective, if a woman (or anyone) is properly informed, she will find the truth so self-evident and persuasive that she will be transformed. An analysis of the importance of newly available print media in the elaboration and dissemination of that knowledge follows.

True knowledge is the basis of a properly ordered society, and the final sections of the introduction look at characteristics of that society, hierarchically ordered among humans and between humans and God. They also focus on the diagnosis of customary practice as the false *shari'at* that thwarts proper order and that must be abolished if the cherished goals of the reformers are ever to be met.

Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi and Deoband

The *Bihishti Zewar* was written by Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (1864–1943), a leader of the Deobandi reform movement that crystallized in north India in the late nineteenth century. The religious leaders at the heart of that movement believed that the world they lived in was seriously awry, and they set out to reform it through the methods they held most central, namely, education of religious leaders, preaching and teaching, public debate, and—as exemplified by this text—a flood of pamphlets and books.³ The *Bihishti Zewar* was intended to provide a basic education for a respectable Muslim woman. It rapidly became a classic gift for Muslim brides, who “entered their husband’s home with the Holy Qur’an in one hand and the *Bihishti Zewar* in the other.”⁴

There have, of course, been critics of the book,⁵ but it has been endlessly reprinted and is found today in virtually any shop that carries works in Urdu, the learned language and lingua franca of most of the Muslims in what are now the countries of India and Pakistan. It has also been widely translated into regional languages, as well as into English for Muslims in the West. The preface to a recent English translation of the work, addressed to both women and men, makes this claim:

This is the best text and reference book on Islam and the Islamic law (Shari'ah), according to the greatest Imam with the largest following not

only in the U.K. but also in the world, Hazrat Imam Abu Hanifah. This is [the] most widely read book after the Holy Qur'an in Urdu, Gujrati, Bengali, Hindi, and now in English too.⁶

Thanawi, a prolific author and spiritual guide for thousands, believed, according to his family, that on account of this book alone he would be saved.⁷

Maulana Thanawi was an extraordinarily successful exponent of reform. One of the second generation of Deobandi *'ulama* (and trained in their central institution, the Daru'l-'Ulum, founded in 1867 some ninety miles northeast of Delhi), he was long active in a new religious school in Kanpur. In his mid-thirties, he retired to his home in a small country town called Thana Bhawan, in the Upper Doab region of the United Provinces. There he wrote voluminously, taught, answered letters, and counseled so many visitors that newcomers were asked to fill out a form upon arrival. Visits were facilitated by the newly opened railway line that passed through Thana Bhawan: the faithful believed that the train tracks had been laid out with that very purpose in mind.

Hundreds of written works are attributed to Thanawi, many actually written by his followers, who—in a custom known elsewhere as well—attributed their work to the person to whom they felt they owed everything. Maulana Thanawi was sought out for his erudition, his passion for reform, his integrity, and his spirituality as a sufi elder; he offered his followers a range of commitments and meanings that were not tied to the institutions and values of the colonial state. He is remembered as a forceful personality who insisted on directness and frankness in all personal meetings.⁸ His successors (*khulafa*), and now their successors, continue to be influential among Muslims of the subcontinent.

The reformist concern with women's—and men's—lives was a response to far-reaching changes in late nineteenth-century India. In examining the stimulus for reform movements in modern India, historians have focused on the changes engendered by the colonial context: the end of Muslim political dominance; an idiom of British rule that encouraged religious identity; the social dislocation caused by changing requirements for participation in governmental and economic roles; the presence of an aggressive alternative range of cultural values; and the growth of cities and the enlarged scale of social and economic activities.⁹ Whatever Thanawi's perceptions of the changes around him, however, the crisis he saw was embodied in the lives of individuals, whose errors pulled them ever more deeply into entanglements

that jeopardized their own salvation, their worldly well-being, and the lives of the individuals and society around them.

Set against the sociopolitical realities of his day, a discourse of hellfire and details of correct practice and belief may seem merely escapist. But any assessment must be far more complex. The movements epitomized by Thanawi and people like him helped to spread an ethical Islam of individual responsibility, which was suitable to a more integrated and more mobile population; it also fostered self-esteem among a subject population. This religious style contributed—as did parallel movements in other communities—to a heightened sense of religious affiliation as the primary focus of social identity in a pluralistic society.¹⁰ A text like the *Bihishti Zewar* is thus at the heart of significant sociopolitical change. All this, however, was far from Thanawi's conscious concerns as he attempted to snap a chain of cause and effect that seemed, to him, to destroy all hope for a comfortable and meaningful life in this world and bliss in the world to come.

There have been many movements broadly resembling the Deobandi in the modern period,¹¹ variously known by such labels as “scripturalist,” “reformist,” or “neo-sufi.”¹² Typically, their leaders are *‘ulama* educated in the classical disciplines, the heirs of the medieval legal traditions (*mazhab*) in religious law (*fiqh*), as well as the heirs of the medieval sufi orders (*silsila*) in inner knowledge and personal experience (*tariqa*). Thus rooted, this mainstream reform has flourished. Today, there are Deobandi schools throughout India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Although they were originally influential among the wellborn, the Deobandis now reach new groups drawn in from lower classes and from more remote provinces.¹³

The Tablighi Jama’at, an off-shoot of the Deobandis, is currently the most influential movement, in terms of numbers, among Muslims in the subcontinent and perhaps in the world. It is a missionary movement to nominal Muslims, providing instruction in basic duties. Tabligh preachers leave their homes for tours, preaching, instructing, and disseminating the tracts and publications for which they are known. Nearly one million people in each country attend the annual gatherings of the Tabligh in both India and Pakistan. The movement has spread to Southeast Asia and to Muslims in the West, even to people who are not of South Asian origin, most notably to North Africans resident in France and Belgium.¹⁴ A translation of the *Bihishti Zewar* is now required reading for Tabligh members in Great Britain.¹⁵ The movement may be relatively unknown, but its cultural importance in the lives of millions of Muslims, including women, who play an active part, is not in doubt.

Muslim Women and Reform

The *Bihishti Zewar* challenges widely held misperceptions and stereotypes of Islamic teachings about women. The collective European image of Middle Eastern society from the seventeenth century asserted an inherent tendency toward despotism; in this context, women's status was declared tantamount to slavery. It was believed that women were treated as objects, and they were considered virtual prisoners in their houses. This stereotype was in time overlaid with another, that of romantic eroticism, with *The Thousand and One Nights* as the canonical text.¹⁶ Many today continue to assume that the position of women in Muslim society is the ultimate example of male oppression and exploitation.

Recent scholarship has questioned the notion that "Islam" is an immutable, independent source of beliefs and institutions and has focused instead on seeing Islam as a discursive system in which Muslims interact with shared symbols, conveyed in sacred texts and shared institutions, to produce very different cultural worlds.¹⁷ Ethnographers have described the wide variety of patterns in Muslim women's lives—women who range from peasant field workers to enterprising traders to highly trained professionals—thus challenging the image of women as passive and secluded. Secluded women have in fact played significant roles in economic life and in family alliances and networks. The *Bihishti Zewar*, for example, both in what is enjoined and in what is condemned, gives evidence of important roles for women in exercising moral leadership, creating social alliances, and managing economic resources in the society it represents.

The Islamic discourse about women has been historically formulated within a corpus of legal texts based in the *shari'at*, the all-encompassing norms based on the Qur'an and the received example of the Prophet Muhammad (the *sunna*), communicated through sayings, or *hadis*. It has been sustained by codes of honor and shame internalized by both women and men.¹⁸ Thanawi's goal in this work is to communicate correct teachings from the *shari'at*. *Shari'at* norms are realized in specific local contexts. Thus, for example, the *shari'at* urges people to marry their "like." Thanawi, writing in north India, delineates specific social categories within which marriage is possible, categories significant only to that region. The *shari'at* specifies that women be morally responsible and that men treat them fairly; the Qur'an, for example, urges fair treatment of co-wives. In recent times, the implications of that text have been variously interpreted as allowing polygamy,

placing restrictions on it, or prohibiting it absolutely on the grounds that fairness is not possible.¹⁹

However differently realized, the *shari'at* has promoted certain themes in relation to women. Concerned with ensuring social order, the Prophet looked upon the sexual virtue of women as central. Thanawi follows the *hadis* in insisting, near the beginning of Book Six, that adultery extends beyond actual sexual relations to thought, sight, hearing, and touch. The jurists demanded that women be secluded, that even—again echoed here—their voices and jewelry not be heard, their perfume not smelled. Mainstream Islamic thought has seen licit sexuality as wholly positive but has looked with horror on deviation. As a check to deviation, control of women has been mirrored in an ideal division of space in which women were removed from public spaces, including mosques.²⁰

The public was in fact the ideal domain of religion; the private, by default, was marginal. For the sufis, some of whom challenged the whole discourse on women by opting for celibacy, women were at times emblematic of the corrupt world, specifically identified with the lower soul, the *nafs* present within each person as the urge to willful and undisciplined behavior defying divine law. The sufi tradition of a love relationship as symbolic of the soul's passion for God, expressed above all in Persian poetry, also posits the beloved as irrational and beyond *shari'at* bounds, outside the public world of Islam and its guardians. Thanawi knows this tradition and explicitly condemns it.²¹

What is it, then, that the *Bihishti Zewar* seeks to reform? It is certainly not the *shari'at*. It is rather all that keeps the *shari'at* from being fulfilled—specifically, wrong attitudes about women that identify them with, or leave them enmeshed in, a world outside the straight path of Islam. Women have often, explicitly or implicitly, been deemed innocent of knowledge, *juhhal*, like children or those who lived in pre-Islamic times.²² Thanawi and his fellow reformist *'ulama* sought to do nothing less than bring women into the high standard of Islamic conformity that had been the purview of educated religious men.

A Single Standard

As the colonial state in India took from Muslims the control of government, it ended what had been both a sphere of activity and a central symbol of an Islamic order. Muslim reformers from the eighteenth century sought to make the *'ulama* the guardians of Islam, and

individuals under their guidance its bastion. For that effort to succeed, the *‘ulama* necessarily had to address a far wider range of Muslims than had scripturalist reformers in earlier times. They were able to seek a wide audience because of new methods and techniques of communication that were available to them, as well as to rivals. They were also motivated by a colonial framework that created an arena for “communities,” whose leaders could “represent” them.²³ The *‘ulama* themselves did not act in the colonial political arena during this period, but they were part of a society whose communal idiom they saw on every side. Common knowledge assumes that identities such as “Indian Muslim” are primary and of long historical standing, but in fact they are products of recent history.²⁴

The *‘ulama* thus increasingly made the custom-laden private world, resting in women’s hands, a central target of reform. To reform individual Muslim lives—when public institutions not only were beyond Muslim control but in some cases also challenged Islam—traditional practices of private life were made an overriding concern. As Faisal Devji has pointed out, this suggests a shift in the relative value of public and private from that held by the traditional ideal of Islamic society.²⁵

Thanawi’s argument, as he sought to reform women, can be simply put: women and men are essentially the same, endowed with the same faculties and equally responsible for their conduct. Both must contend with the fundamental human condition of the struggle between intelligence or sense, *‘aql*, on the one hand, and the undisciplined impulses of the lower soul, *nafs*, on the other. Looking around him, Thanawi believes that women are more likely than men to be troubled by *nafs*, but, to use modern language, he finds this situation culturally, not genetically, determined. This is clear from his emphasis, discussed below, on the centrality of knowledge and on the ability of women to adhere to the standard being set for all, if only they are adequately informed. There can never be a *prima facie* case that women are morally inferior to men.

At the same time, they are not superior. In contrast to the Victorian notion of women’s special spiritual capacity, Thanawi argued that women and the home were yet to be converted to appropriate standards. This point must be emphasized, for a special female spiritual capacity has often been wrongly read into Islamic tradition. The historical view does not, in fact, see women as “better equipped than men to be ‘carriers of tradition’ ”—quite the opposite.²⁶ The argument that identifies women and the home as the locus of cultural tradition, the rock against an encroaching alien world, does appear among Muslim

thinkers, but it is one constituted during and after the colonial period, not earlier.

The conclusive evidence that Thanawi enjoined a single standard of behavior for women and men was his response when he was asked to write a companion guide, directed to men, to the *Bihishti Zewar*. He replied that the existing book would serve perfectly well. He simply added an appendix, the *Bihishti Gauhar* (The heavenly gem), describing practices such as the community prayer specific to men. Indeed, the English translations of the work in use today, focusing on legal norms rather than on sample letters, the household, and so forth, give no indication that the book was once meant solely for women. It is hard to imagine a guidebook for women written in 1900 in Europe or America that could also be recommended as a proper guide for men.

Though men and women are identical in all that matters, Thanawi never questions their different social roles. Women are meant to be socially subordinate to men and to adhere to the *shari'at* standard of seclusion, when possible, inside the home. Indeed, Thanawi insists, it is reformed behavior that will instruct women—and all people—concerning their proper place and that will enhance fulfillment of their proper roles. One of the first reformist texts directed to women,²⁷ the *Bihishti Zewar* is not a conservative document, “the dying cry of a repressive feudal order,”²⁸ but the product of a modern movement that both redefined a social role for the *'ulama*, apart from the state, and challenged the received cultural tradition preserved above all by women in the home.

If the *Bihishti Zewar* can be seen to have an overriding focus in its teachings for all individuals, it is to delineate the characteristics of a reformist temperament: moderate in all things, unflinchingly self-controlled, minimally engaged in social relations, and wholly absorbed in fulfillment of the religious law. There is no effort to differentiate male and female in this model.

It is risky to generalize about a “reformist temperament.” But Thanawi’s anxieties about human behavior, his despairing assessment of the world around him, and his convictions about the possibility of change all strike themes that resonate in other movements of religious reform, notably in major streams of Protestant thought in the sixteenth century, as well as in the reformist positions of some Hindu thinkers who were Thanawi’s contemporaries in India.²⁹ Among all these reformers, we find images of society as a suffocating morass that entangles people in false paths. We find a confidence that unambiguous true knowledge can be realized and must be conveyed to all through educa-

tion; it is the key to escape from false paths that distort relationships and priorities. We find a concern with encouraging individuals to cultivate personalities based on moderation and relentless self-control. We find as well a shared conviction that women's conduct is the key to social reform.

Women were, however, to be subservient to men. This is patriarchy, as the word "manage" in the epigraph above suggests. But the new patriarchy of the *'ulama* was not the old. Women were to enjoy the respect accorded those who had mastered true knowledge. At the same time, the *'ulama* reinforced the ideal of women remaining in their own homes, secluded from all but family and selected female friends. This central teaching constrained the potential power that could have been derived from literacy and access to the learned tradition. These limits on women's public roles would become even more significant as a public sphere of employment, education, voluntary associations, and entertainment expanded in the twentieth century.

Men's authority, moreover, now ideally reached into what had been largely a female world, the world of social and familial relationships, expressed in festive occasions and the passages marking birth, growth, illness, marriage, and death, as well as a world of distinctive traditions in piety and worship.³⁰ Eliminating all these customary practices meant a check on female autonomy as well as restrictions on the participation of women in gatherings and ceremonies that defined much of their social interaction and even identity. The *Bihishti Zewar*, particularly in Book Six, provides rich descriptions of that sphere in its very attempt to penetrate and modify it.

Medicine offers an example of male intrusion into a heretofore largely female domain. The medicine of herbs and amulets, the medicine connected above all with midwives and childbirth, had long been in women's hands. Parallel to the reform of the religious sciences in the late nineteenth century, however, came reform in medicine, a revival of the scientific medicine of the Greco-Arabic humoral system, which came to be seen as equivalent or even superior to the Western medical system.³¹ This medicine, *yunani tibb*, was even taught as an ancillary subject at Deoband so that the *'ulama* could further serve their followers. Women were enjoined to learn its application, too, and the *Bihishti Zewar* itself, in Book Nine, includes a section summarizing *yunani* treatments.³² Women were now to disdain the interventions of the wise women, who were dismissed as no more than quacks. The reformers sought to include women in what they saw as a higher standard of behavior, but they did so at the cost of areas of family and ritual life that had been women's domain.

Thanawi's unitary ideal of human nature and moral capacity presents a dramatic contrast to prevalent Victorian notions of femininity and masculinity. The epigraph describing the Prophet's manner suggests aspects of an ideal person who is in no sense tailored to fit a Victorian masculine standard. Ashis Nandy has recently argued that the European ideal originated, in part, in the colonial experience. The cult of masculinity in Victorian Britain, he suggests, must be seen as part of the impact of the colonial experience on the colonizers, who cast their relationship to the colonies in terms of gender as part of their implicit justification of their imperial role. Their definition of masculinity was, in turn, to shape the interpretation both of gender roles and of central religious symbols by Indian reformers motivated to share this aspect of imperial discourse.³³ But, as the brief epigraph describing the Prophet makes clear, Maulana Thanawi stood apart from such concerns.

To put Thanawi's principles in perspective, one might compare the first epigraph above to a description of an important strand in the contemporaneous European and American discourse on women, restricting female education on medical grounds:

Because reproduction was woman's grand purpose in life, doctors agreed that women had to concentrate all their energy downward toward the womb. . . . Too much reading or intellectual stimulation in the fragile stage of adolescence could result in permanent damage to the reproductive organs, and sickly, irritable babies.³⁴

Maulana Thanawi's society knew no counterpart to the pseudoscientific medical theories of the nineteenth century that posited such radical difference between women and men. In relation to education, Thanawi argued, the only difference between girls and boys was that girls, being (ideally) confined to the home, had an advantage in having more time available for learning. In nineteenth-century Europe, the hierarchic model of antiquity had begun to give way to a bipolar model insisting that genders differed in kind, not only in status.³⁵ No such change took place among Muslims, where Galenic theories of common human bodily and moral characteristics continued to hold sway. The Muslim reformers simply wanted to make the women of their day—in all that was important—more like educated men.

The "heavenly ornaments" of Thanawi's title, one might add, are not women themselves as adornments or ornaments of domestic life.³⁶ There is no notion that women are the Victorian "angel of the house," that in their protected sphere they rise to a higher and purer morality. Darwin, for example, judged women unlike men in their "greater tenderness and less selfishness" (although he hastened to

link these and other traits to “the lower races and . . . a past and lower state of civilization”).³⁷ The “ornaments” in Thanawi’s work are rather a metaphor for the virtues both women and men must cultivate in themselves, the virtues that will earn them the pearls and bracelets of heaven (Qur’an 22:23). They correspond to the “treasures” one lays up in heaven, the point reinforced by the fact that the book was to become a dowry gift, a context in which “real” jewelry had been expected. Thus two of the distinctive themes of Victorian culture in relation to women—what might be called the “medical” view and the “pedestal”—must not be read into the position of Islamic reformers, with the assumption that a domestic role for women carries these notions along as inevitable baggage.

There were Indian reformers who did participate in the European discourse on women. Contrasting their position with Thanawi’s is instructive. The British critique of Indian society, as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century, singled out issues related to women: child marriage, female infanticide, sati, female education, remarriage of widows. In responding to this British agenda, reformers, preeminently Bengali Hindus, sought to define a domestic sphere that provided a source of self-esteem and unity. Reacting to the colonial critique, they insisted that their social life, restored to its true form, represented a higher, more spiritual morality than that of the imperial rulers.

They set a standard for a new middle-class woman of modest dress, distinctive educational attainments, and piety that at once distinguished her from the uneducated, traditional, often lower-status Indian woman and from what they saw as the heartless, worldly European woman. She was to be nothing less than a central symbol of cherished, but endangered, Bengali culture. The woman was the center of the home, and the difference between the world and the home became the root dichotomy from which other dichotomies—notably, materialism in contrast to spiritualism, and masculinity in contrast to femininity—flowed. The masculine, materialistic world was dominated by the colonial presence; the feminine, spiritual home was seen as free. The Indian woman was to be the bastion against all that was corrupt in the West, and, weighted with new skills and a new moral role, she was also to be unlike the traditional woman, who was caught up in what were now objectionable practices.

As in Victorian Britain, a central premise of Bengali Hindu reform was that women were essentially different from men. In India, the Hindu middle-class reformers could draw on their own tradition of goddesses and saints to outdo the Victorians and imbue domestic “an-

gels,” similarly sheltered from the external world and able to cultivate tender and spiritual qualities, with divinity itself.³⁸ Ironically, as in the Muslim case, strands in this historical tradition, notably in the Sanskrit Vedas, had long marginalized women; far from being privileged carriers of sacred tradition, women had not even been allowed to hear the sacred texts.

The *Bihishti Zewar* differs in significant ways from the advice books for women that proliferated in nineteenth-century America and England—or in Bengal. Like them, this book sought to standardize a respectable morality throughout a large population during a period of social change; also like them, it encouraged female competence and self-confidence in a domestic sphere.³⁹ Unlike them, however, this work did not attempt to enhance gender differences, making women’s unique self-sacrifice and dependence the key to a guardianship of morality. That guardianship was entrusted to anyone, woman or man, who honed his or her essential character to Islamic standards through knowledge and through relentless discipline and self-control.

An irony of the “new traditionalism” in Bengal is that the reformist program, while purporting to be starkly anti-Western, took its parameters from the Western critique. The same is true for Muslim “modernists,” those who—in contrast to the *‘ulama*—interacted with Western values and institutions. In fact, however, the concern with women’s education among the first generation of the “westernizers” at Aligarh owed much, as did their entire program, to a grounding in the reformist milieu of the *‘ulama*, with whom they shared an opposition to customary practice. Many moved on to apologetics and to defense of “true” Islam against Western criticism.⁴⁰ They also began to see women as both helpless and spiritual. Iqbal’s poems, for example, place women above book-learning and consider education potentially harmful to the special feminine qualities that inspire men.⁴¹

Abul A’la Maududi, the founder of the Islamist Jama’at-i Islami,⁴² similarly espoused a “dualistic view of humanity,” rendering women passive and submissive but endowed with a special spiritual capacity.⁴³ But one should not assume that this Jama’ati emphasis, making women the central symbol of a properly ordered Islamic society, is part of a long tradition.⁴⁴ Thanawi, closer to the historical tradition, was egalitarian in respect to human nature. Moreover (despite the use of the *Bihishti Zewar* by the late Zia ul Haq, the Islamizing president of Pakistan),⁴⁵ Thanawi never saw his teachings as part of state policy: he enjoined self-control, not state control over others, which is a modern phenomenon rather than part of a long tradition.

For all this, Thanawi’s effort was emotionally charged. In a por-

trayal that is especially notable in a work predicated on the importance of control and self-control, the *Bihishti Zewar* clearly represents women as always on the verge of moving out of control, of displaying excess, of spilling over—in where they go, what they buy, how much they talk, what they eat. Thanawi implies that most women must struggle more than men to attain the discipline and self-control that are the heart of his teachings. Women are shown as the victims of custom, but also as its perpetrators.

No section highlights this vision more than the colorful vignette set out in Book Six, in which women cast aside all restraint and gad about day and night to drop in on someone or participate in some ceremonial gathering or another. A seemingly innocent event brings endless sin and disorder in its train. The author identifies no fewer than thirty-two sins in these imagined outings and warns that these are only a few of those actually committed! The trips are morally corrupting, becoming occasions for pride, extravagance, financial pressure on the husband that might lead him to sin, financial dealings that are beyond the law. Immodesty and mingling of the sexes occur at every turn. Envy, ingratitude, and greed are coupled with gossip and backbiting as the women talk among themselves. The porters are likely to be abused, as is the hostess, who is invariably saddled with extra guests. The reformist standards of outward observance of the *shari'at* and inward moral purification and self-control could not be more challenged.

Much as he insisted on women's potential and on the variety among women, Maulana Thanawi described the women's behavior he saw as largely uncontrolled and emotional. In the depiction of the outing in Book Six, in the treatment of good women in Book Eight (where their virtues are marveled at), and, most explicitly, in Book Ten's list of twenty-nine points on the shortcomings of women (most related to lack of proportion and self-control), Maulana Thanawi depicts women as having suppressed *'aql*, the intelligence or sense on which a good life depends. Even literacy for women, a key reason the *Bihishti Zewar* was written, seems problematic when Thanawi imagines the possibility of women breaking through seclusion to indulge in illicit correspondence or reading heaven-knows-what in novels. The conviction that women are essentially the same as men, different only in hierarchy and hence in role, seems precarious at best, given what appears to be persistent breaking with the role that women should, by nature, fervently accept.

The anxiety over women's behavior suggests that women are seen as an extension of men: in women, men see the lack of control they most fear in themselves. As noted above, women have been associated with

the *nafs*, or lower soul, both as a stimulus to male lack of control and as a metaphor.⁴⁶ The regional culture, moreover, when called into question, as it is particularly in Book Six, can also be equated with *nafs*, as a dark unruly world, less disciplined and less ordered than the principles represented by Islam.⁴⁷ Thus the emotional intensity associated with the end of custom and the establishment of the *shari'at* can be understood. In opposing custom, the reformers at once call into question their own propensity for deviation and reject intimate aspects of their own lives associated with women and home.

Yet Maulana Thanawi did hold, in principle, to the insistence that because women are in essence like men, they should be educated like men. In later editions of the *Bihishti Zewar* (summarized in the translator's introduction to Book Eight), he takes issue with those who hold that women are intrinsically weaker in character than men. Thanawi did, after all, write the *Bihishti Zewar*. For him, it is central that Muslims—all Muslims—develop the personal characteristics and acquire the learning that will permit them to worship God as they should and to live their everyday personal and social lives with ceaseless scrutiny. He believes that women are, in the end, every bit as capable as men of the moral discipline he enjoins. He believes that women's interests—like those of all people—will be enhanced when Muslims acknowledge one another's rights and respect one another's places, as they come to know the place of all humans in relation to God. He does *not* seek to enhance sexual differences—essential physiological or moral differences—that burden women, as we would see it, with either silly little heads or hearts of gold.

Readers of this text will no doubt ask, in the light of their own social norms, whether women lost or gained by the influence of scripturalist reform. Clearly, many Muslim women have seen their interests, usually understood as closely linked to those of their families, served by teachings of the sort set forth here. Not only were they assured of divine blessings, but they were also offered the clearly empowering skills of literacy and rationally organized principles of behavior. In some specific legal areas, moreover, they gained rights provided in Qur'anic teachings that enhanced women's autonomy in relation to property and marriage. Such skills and standards often proved a source of status for them within the family and for the family as a whole. Against this, of course, reformed women lost a separate sphere of female activity. They accepted the authority of male specialists. They took as their ideal female seclusion in the home. They did all this in the confidence that they could, with effort, achieve the same standards and merit the same rewards as any man.

Maulana Thanawi and the Importance of Knowledge

At the beginning of the *Bihishti Zewar*, Thanawi firmly sets his sights on the positive. The heart of his message is education in doctrine, behavior, and character. Thus he exhorts women to become educated, and he summarizes for them in considerable detail the fundamental religious obligations in worship and in social relationships on which all else rests. Women *can* change. In the poem on “true jewelry” (with which Thanawi begins and ends this work), it is the faculty of intelligence or sense (*‘aql*), theirs to deploy, that crowns all as the “head fringe” and that responds to the authoritative guidance of good counsel and the Book as earrings; they make possible the fruits of good works, symbolized by the remaining jewelry.

Thanawi clearly believes that his fellow Muslims have brought trouble on themselves by straying from the teachings of Islam; they have distorted their true nature, the nature that lives in harmony through Islam. Their lives have become vapid, offensive, consumed with concern for worldly goods and a good reputation, plagued by frustrated social relationships. All of this results from what Thanawi—unlike most women and men of his day—sees as a single cause: ignorance that accepts customary practices. Those customs, in an inexorable sequence, drag people into what Thanawi frequently describes as a prison. His pedagogic technique is to begin with instruction in what is right; only correct knowledge can break the chain that creates its own bondage.

The privileged position given to correct and certain knowledge was part of the heritage of most learned Muslims of Thanawi’s time, though reformers like himself gave it particular emphasis. The first key aspect of this knowledge is that it is absolute, outside the knower, revealed by God for all time. Concerning what is essential, there is no need for interpretation, no possibility of legitimate disagreement. Anyone who fails to accept the core of correct knowledge, identified as Islam, either has failed to understand it or is in deliberate rebellion against God. (This is an understanding, I might note, that the non-Muslim researcher encounters today in conversation with those who continue this view of the self-evident validity of Islam.)⁴⁸ If Thanawi can only get people’s attention and provide them with the information they need, reform will—or should—necessarily follow.⁴⁹

The authority for this correct knowledge is the revealed text of God’s direct word, the Qur’an, and the *sunna*, the practice of the Prophet that makes manifest the teachings of the Qur’an, as conveyed in the *hadis*. Thanawi turns to these two sources to begin his work. He

first quotes a Qur'anic verse: "O believers, save yourselves and the people of your households from the fire whose fuel is people and stones." Nothing could more strongly emphasize the seriousness of his teachings. The second verse points to the key to salvation: "Remember what is read in your houses of God's verses and wise teachings." The *hadis* confirm this, echoing each verse. The first recalls the Judgment: "Every one from among you is guardian of my words, and every one is liable to be questioned about that guardianship"; the second points to prudent behavior: "It is a duty incumbent on every Muslim man and every Muslim woman to acquire knowledge." There is no distinction of gender in this most important of all responsibilities.

The Qur'an is, in principle and in different ways, important to all Muslims. But it is the reform movements that focus on the content of the revealed sources. Academically, their leaders have studied and taught Qur'an and *hadis* (*manqulat*), at the expense of the so-called rational sciences (*ma'qulat*), understood as representing the exercise of mental effort upon the original texts. Thanawi's fellow *'ulama* of the Deoband school, for example, were *hadis* scholars above all. They discouraged the speculative disciplines such as logic and philosophy that had first flourished in the eighth to tenth centuries (stimulated by interaction with Greek culture) and had received renewed impetus in eighteenth-century India through the curricular reform of the *dars-i nizami*.⁵⁰

In his list of correct beliefs in Book One, Thanawi refers implicitly to the great questions that exercised the minds of Muslim philosophers. Many concerned the nature of God's unity and the status of his attributes—essential or contingent, created or uncreated. Thanawi asserts God's complete omnipotence and self-sufficiency and closes off discussion with his seventh point: "As for the statements about these attributes reported in many places in the Qur'an and *hadis*, entrust their meaning to God, for he alone knows their truth. We, without undue explication, believe with certainty that whatever their meaning, they are right and true." Other philosophical issues confronted the intractable questions of predestination (*qadr, taqdir*), human agency, and the existence of evil. In point eight, Thanawi writes: "There are many mysteries concerning the creation of evil that no one knows." A generation earlier, Delhi intellectuals had debated questions such as whether an all-powerful God could lie and whether God could create another prophet like Muhammad.⁵¹ Thanawi would have none of this.

The focus on scripture made for certainty. The *Bihishti Zewar* is filled with references to *hadis* and Qur'an, including a consolidated list of one hundred one key *hadis* in Book Seven, many of them repeated

elsewhere in the work. What is given in Qur'an and *hadis* is beyond question. In the twenty-seventh point of his list of beliefs, Thanawi writes: "Faith is lost . . . from considering any of these matters false, or from picking out faults or making jokes about them." Nor, he notes in the next point, is there any legitimacy in "bend[ing] the text to one's own purpose."

The second key aspect of this knowledge is that it is not only certain but also comprehensive. The knowledge embedded in Islam encompasses all dimensions of human concerns. There are no alternate models to explain various aspects of a person's life: no religious model using constructs such as "body" and "soul"; no political model speaking of "the will"; no psychological model using terms such as "ego" and "id," or "anima" and "shadow"; no medical model using the language of a distinctive science. Islam offers a single language, and a scholar like Thanawi can move from a discussion of religious practice to psychological development, to social organization, to medicine. There is no knowledge more basic or more important.

Third, this knowledge is not sought for its own sake. It is worse to know and not act upon this knowledge than not to know at all. The fourth story from the *hadis* included in Book One describes the horrific punishment facing someone who knows the Qur'an and fails to remember it. The point is reiterated in various lists and in the summaries of *hadis*. True knowledge must be acted on and shared. Moreover, as the theory of personal development implicit in Book Seven makes clear, correct knowledge and correct behavior are reciprocal: if one knows, one acts; as one acts, one's knowledge is deepened. Book Seven, informed by principles that resonate throughout the sufi tradition, makes clear how knowledge must be embodied. It analyzes the bases of human emotions and vices and lays out a program for building character, insisting on each person's potential for personal change.

Thanawi's stylistic technique is to show that people base their actions and beliefs on false understandings. In Book Six, for example, he categorizes customs by the degree to which they are misconstrued as legitimate. He sets up irony upon irony, showing that people believe one thing when in fact their judgment is radically wrong. He also organizes his argument to show the slippery downward slope of error, an argument begun on the very first page of the work. Lack of knowledge begins the descent. Women's ignorance of the religious sciences is not, as we might say, academic: "faulty belief leads to faulty character, faulty character to faulty action, and faulty action to faulty dealings that are the root of the disquietude of society." As the emphasis on

knowledge makes clear, however, women's error is not inherent but susceptible to change.

Knowledge and Printed Books

What makes Thanawi's focus on correct knowledge so distinctive is that, in company with the other reformers of his day, he is concerned not only with scholarly reproduction of the received tradition but also with communicating the essence of this tradition to all persons, including women in the home. This concern takes its urgency and its potential from the newly available facilities for printing, an availability that shapes the centrality given to bookish learning in Thanawi's argument. The medium, in that sense, permits the message.

It is difficult to imagine the popularization of systematic teachings on correct belief and practice without the religious publications that began to be widely available in the late nineteenth century. Printed works had been crucial to the early nineteenth-century reform movement; they had been circulated very widely because they were used as texts for oral presentation in what was largely an illiterate society.⁵² Only when written texts provided a detailed standard of religious learning could that detailed standard be made the goal. By the late nineteenth century, printed books were increasingly available. One contemporary follower has appreciatively written of Thanawi himself: "The number of pages of his published work exceeds the number of days of his life."⁵³

Maulana Thanawi's generation saw the spread of lithographic printing, which had been introduced in north India only decades before. Old people still remembered the situation earlier in the century, when religious education depended on precious manuscripts, and teaching took place only in learning circles, as aspiring scholars moved from master to master and fragmentary texts passed hand to hand.⁵⁴ Printed books were central to the transformation of religious education in the late nineteenth century, as formally organized religious schools began to spread. But change in education was not limited to change in the education of the *'ulama*.

The availability of books marks the transition from what one scholar has called an "esoteric" paradigm, in which knowledge depends on a hierarchic relationship of personal transmission, to a "rationalistic" paradigm, in which education is in principle available to all.⁵⁵ The latter paradigm carries with it a new concern for understanding, as

opposed to rote learning alone. One can contrast the education linked to the *Bihishti Zewar* with what had earlier been standard education for girls. An autobiography of a Muslim woman born at mid-century, one Bibi Ashraf, describes her learning (along with other girls of the family and a maidservant) to vocalize the Arabic of the Qur'an in order to be able to read it aloud, an important ritual activity. She was also taught needlework.⁵⁶

Thanawi's "Second Essay" at the end of Book Ten offers a contrast to Bibi Ashraf's education: here, the author urges the teacher using this vernacular work to elicit the lessons from the girls, having them figure out as much as they can on their own. The girls should always repeat the lesson in their own words, he writes, and if there are two or three of them, they should ask each other questions. The teacher is to teach only what the girls can grasp. The teacher should also explain the subject and intervene if the girls act contrary to what they are taught. This is far from technical reading aloud in an unknown language or rote memorization of fixed texts. Not only Bibi Ashraf's education but primary education everywhere has often stressed authority and rote.⁵⁷ Maulana Thanawi's remarkably effective method was innovative, as indicated by the lists of instructions he included. It was, no doubt, the product of his concern that girls actually learn their lessons in order to follow what was taught.

Print changed the roles of teacher and learner, allowing learning to take place independently—as Bibi Ashraf, with purloined ashes for ink and a cousin's schoolbook, demonstrated. Nevertheless, the *Bihishti Zewar* reiterates throughout the need for a teacher, even though printed works were available.⁵⁸ "It is absurd," Thanawi writes, "to think that Muslims can dispense with *'ulama*." Thanawi specifically addresses this issue in Book Ten, where, as he prepares to end the work, he worries that the young women he has taken this far may now be set loose on the various readily available publications of the day. To try to continue his influence after a reader has finished the *Bihishti Zewar*, he draws up lists to shape what is to be read next. The Deobandis themselves taught women of their own families, in contrast to families like Bibi Ashraf's, who either hired female teachers or depended on older women in the family.⁵⁹ Thanawi reminds his readers of the importance of consulting the learned, whether one is reading a book of medicine or of spiritual discipline; the risks of education without masters are too great. The issue is not limited to women gaining education independently. One of the major changes of this century has been the breakdown of the monopoly on religious education held by the *'ulama* when the secularly educated—for example, in the Islamist

movements—claim authority, without *madrassa* education, in the interpretation of sacred texts.

Although it was intended to teach literacy, the *Bihishti Zewar* has flourished in a largely nonliterate society. The *Bihishti Zewar* carries with it—in its repetitiveness and lists, for example—characteristics of an oral world.⁶⁰ Again and again, the reader is urged to make oral presentations based on the various books, by reading aloud to those in the household who cannot read themselves, whether family or menials or guests.⁶¹ Thanawi even envisions a wife sharing this work with her husband, lest there be an imbalance in their knowledge.

The *Bihishti Zewar* was intended for an oral, public world. It was to be read aloud, discussed openly, taught in groups. The image of reading in this society is primarily formed by the recitation of the Qur'an, the first goal of any education. Injunctions on the importance of reading aloud from the Qur'an recur throughout the *Bihishti Zewar*. In creating his list of proscribed reading in Book Ten, Thanawi perhaps intended to discourage not only the content of the works listed but also the privacy of reading silently, of creating a private world of one's own inner voice by losing oneself—a terrible image, in Thanawi's view—in books like novels.⁶² Thanawi, to be sure, also condemned oral reading and recitation that he associated with corruption and excess: the nightlong *musha'ira* of the poet, the mourning *majalis* of the Shi'a, and the storytelling sessions of the *dastango*.

As print shaped the popular dissemination of religious teachings and an entire style of religious education, it also fostered the sectarianism that was such a central characteristic of religious change in this period. Printed works made room for internal debate and the honing of sectarian differences, perhaps promoting divisiveness, but also advancing the extent to which religious issues became part of a public world. The importance of an oral debate was often found less in the event itself than in the formulaic presentation of the event in published, pamphlet form. "Pamphlet wars" were carried on among Muslims and with outsiders, with response stimulating response.⁶³ The role of Protestant missionaries in such exchanges, with their commitment to certain knowledge of the Bible and their interest in debate, seems to have reinforced—or, perhaps, in the case of some Hindus, actually to have created—a response in kind.⁶⁴

The *Bihishti Zewar* competed with missionary publications and with the publications of those associated with the movement in favor of Western education. The latter often shared some of Thanawi's concerns (most important, the education of girls and the disapproval of customs), but they did not disseminate detailed legal guidance. Unlike

Thanawi, they typically sought, and often got, patronage from the government, which was concerned with developing what it considered beneficial literature in Urdu, including literature for women.⁶⁵ Other reformers also competed for women readers. The Begam of Bhopal, for example, princess of a protected state, had come under the influence of the Ahl-i Hadis. Veiled completely, she traveled widely to encourage the education of girls and also wrote the popular *Tahzibu'n-niswan*, on religious guidance for women. (Despite the difference in legal principles, Maulana Thanawi expresses admiration for her work in Book Ten.) Books for women were also written by the so-called Barelwi *'ulama*, one titled the *Sunni bihishti zewar*.⁶⁶

Texts like the *Bihishti Zewar*—produced in printed form, meant for a new kind of education, and avowedly competing with other viewpoints—nevertheless resemble in some ways their predecessors, the Persian works of deportment (*adab*), which were intended for popular instruction in this cultural area. A recent analysis of two of these works shows that they cover much the same range as the *Bihishti Zewar*: tenets of the faith, requisite religious duties, hygiene, family relations, useful knowledge, stories of the prophets, virtues and vice and their consequences at Judgment. They include lists of good advice and are divided into separate parts.⁶⁷ Intended for a male audience, they were read aloud in the home, in mosques, and in teahouses; they too appear in printed form.

But the *Bihishti Zewar* differs from these and other *adab* texts in significant ways. First, it is written in colloquial Urdu, a mark of its late nineteenth-century origin and of the fact that it was meant to be pondered carefully and understood. Second, far from reproducing and disseminating the received culture, it is critical, avoiding what are deemed superstitious teachings, for example, and ecstatic poetry. Its legal teachings are more detailed, and they are presented systematically, with the aid of rationalized lists of principles. And, finally, the *Bihishti Zewar* was written for women, not men. There is no discussion of public life, the ethics of rulers, or service to the king. Gone too is the conventional misogyny of the earlier texts, with warnings of female infidelity and checklists of desiderata for a bride. The classic texts of Persian *adab*, the *Qabusnama* of the eleventh century and the *Akhlaq-i nasiri* of the thirteenth, were widely read in India for the edification of the male elite and specifically discouraged instruction in writing for women; the latter work discouraged reading as well.⁶⁸ In the reformist climate of the *Bihishti Zewar*, women, far from being discouraged, were seen as key. Maulana Thanawi and his fellow reformers thus

utilized a new medium to reach a new audience with what was in fact a new message.

Women and Hierarchy

At the heart of the message was a concept of appropriate hierarchy in every domain. Muslims needed to know their place in relation to God and in relation to one another. Women's place was defined by being Muslim, by gender, and by class, all factors that were shaped in significant ways by the particular cultural and historical context. As Muslims, the reformers insisted, women were equally addressed by the message of revelation and were individually responsible for—and capable of—securing their own salvation.

Women were, however, regarded as socially subordinate to the men of their families. Following the Qur'an, Thanawi lists women among men's possessions. Following the *hadis*, he identifies dominant women as a sign of the Last Day. Women, he says, must not dress like men and must not claim superiority over men (for example, in a ritual inversion that was sometimes part of the marriage festivities described by a horrified Thanawi). He quotes a *hadis* asserting that women are the greater number of those assigned to hell.

In Book Four, Maulana Thanawi argues that ingratitude toward a husband is as much a sin as ingratitude toward God. A woman is to follow her husband's will and whims in all things, to seek his permission on all issues, to call the day night if he does.⁶⁹ A woman is expected to be responsible for her husband's happiness and to respond to his mood: "She holds his heart in her hand." "Never think of him as your equal, never let him do any work for you. . . . If he comes to you and begins to massage your hands or feet, stop him; you would not let your father do this service, and your husband's rank is higher than your father's." A woman's power, Maulana Thanawi claims, is in her submission. He describes a woman in Lucknow whose husband is a scoundrel; she never complains, and she even sends out food for him to eat with his women from the bazaar. When God orders him to cease his bad conduct, Thanawi insists, he will become her slave.

Women in this subordinate niche, however, were entitled to rights (*huquq*) that the reformers believed had been obscured by custom. Custom had deprived widows, for example, of the right to remarriage, condemning them in most cases to a life of penury and dependence. Custom also often denied women their rights to inheritance and the

marriage portion (*mahr*). Custom subjected women to extreme inconvenience, physical discomfort, and financial exploitation.

Reformist teachings, moreover, provided women with literacy and numeracy, keys not only to religious knowledge but also to better management of their domestic roles, to their personal advantage, and to the advantage and status of their families. The reformers also taught systematic principles (as seen in the list at the end of Book Six) against which all custom should be measured; the presentation of Galenic medicine, for example, was meant to replace both charms and the folk medicine of midwives. To be able to think and reason methodically—not simply to know discrete cures or practices—contributed to a kind of cultural empowerment for women. Early Islam strengthened women’s legal and economic position, and the reformists, inspired by that period, sought to do the same. When challenged by modernists, Thanawi’s heirs insisted that they alone sought women’s authentic “rights.”

There was, of course, considerable variability in the actual authority enjoyed by women in different families. A particular opportunity for an enhanced role for women was presented during this period by the absence of male family members who were posted away from home because of work. The sample letters in Book One suggest the new pattern of husbands and fathers being away from home, as do many literary works of the time, including Bibi Ashraf’s life story and the novel *Mir’atu’l-’arus*, discussed in Book Ten. This pattern was a stimulus to the writing of the *Bihishti Zewar*, which was intended both to provide women with the skills they needed in this situation and to encourage them to act correctly and demonstrate self-control. The Qur’anic verse printed on each title page refers to a woman’s responsibility in her husband’s absence. As in the case of women today whose male relatives migrate to cities or to the Gulf, women in charge of a household could assume more roles and responsibilities than had earlier been the case.

Women were nonetheless subordinate to their husbands and to other senior men of their families. In a highly stratified society, however, privileged women were superior to inferior men. Maulana Thanawi did not challenge the basic structure of that society. Its pervasive characteristics, part of both the Muslim and the Indic heritage, are implicit in his teaching of letter writing and forms of address, in his emphasis on civility, and in his injunctions concerning arranging marriage partners and dealing with servants. The *’ulama* themselves were from families who typically claimed foreign descent, understood to be a claim to superior status. By the late nineteenth century, it was likely that most of these families owned some land, had some members em-

ployed in government or princely service, and perhaps were engaged in some kind of trade. It was to such families that the *Bihishti Zewar* initially spoke.

The women in these families ideally remained secluded from all but their close kin and particularly from all men, except their closest relations; it was intended that the women would stay at home.⁷⁰ Even so, they were responsible and powerful within their families and within their society. A woman in such a family had heavy responsibility for the family's social and material resources. The importance of managing social relations, including alliances defined by marriage and gifts, is evident in Book Six; and the technical skills required to run a household where primary products had to be processed and stored are evident in Book Ten.

The wellborn of both sexes had considerable authority over those of lower birth. The *Bihishti Zewar* assumes that the women it addresses deal with menials. Part of its goal, in fact, is to clarify hierarchic relations, so that people get and receive their due, moral and material—among family members, with retainers, and toward the poor. Women may in principle be subordinate to men, but they are certainly not subordinate to inferior men in this hierarchic society.⁷¹

Maulana Thanawi did not question the existence of social hierarchy. He did deplore an excessive emphasis on lineage, especially if it distracted one from personal responsibility. He also criticized snobbery toward women who had been brought into a family from outside (marriage within the family was preferred), especially if the newcomer was regarded as being of low birth (of a *ghatiya jagah*). In Book Four, he accepts the *shari'at* injunctions that like should marry like.⁷² Although he recommends that occupational groups marry among themselves—weavers with weavers, tailors with tailors, and so forth—he modifies the conventional marriage categories of those who claimed respectable birth (the *ashraf*): the *saiyids*, descendents of the Prophet; the *shaikhs*, descendents of the Companions and converts not identified with service castes; Mughals; and Afghans or Pathans, these two being descendents of medieval rulers. Although each of these four groups is further divided into hierarchically ranked endogamous units, Maulana Thanawi asserts that all *saiyids* and all *shaikhs* are equal for the purposes of marriage; similarly, the Mughals and Pathans could marry each other. These looser categories give him more scope to insist that real nobility, *sharafat*, depends more on character than on birth.

Following Hanafi law, Thanawi points out that status is determined not only by birth but also by a family history of being Muslim, not being destitute, and not being insane. But the greatest source of status,

he insists, is piety. By this measure, he ventures, even the poor could in fact be superior. He argues that manual labor deserves respect. English education, whatever worldly achievement it allowed, is viewed as a threat to piety. Parents are warned to weigh piety heavily, on the grounds that an impious person, by definition, would thwart hierarchy: failing to render God his due (*haqq*), a man could hardly be expected to give his wife her due.

The *Bihishti Zewar* was used from the beginning by those making claims to enhanced respectability. Over time, it has been read by populations distant from the heartland of Muslim cultural and political dominance (evident from its translation into languages such as Pashtu) and by groups at various (and lower) levels of the social hierarchy. As in Europe, print culture has disseminated elite norms.⁷³ Group emulation of the ritual and social practices of the wellborn has historically characterized social mobility in the subcontinent, a process described in some contexts as “sanskritization,” to suggest the extent to which upwardly mobile groups aspire to be included in the ritual and rules of Sanskrit texts;⁷⁴ the term “ashrafization” has been coined to describe the parallel process among Muslims. Participation in normative religion and education is a mark of respectability, made more possible by printed texts such as the *Bihishti Zewar*.

The reformists’ insistence that women should receive religious education, justified by the teachings of pristine revelation, went against conservative opinion of the time, however. Maulana Thanawi at one point in his text answers an imaginary critic, an older woman who, in her disapproval of religious education for girls, asks, “Do you want to teach them to read and write to turn them into *maulawis*, like men?” Maulana Thanawi answers that this is indeed his goal but insists that education can at the same time enhance a girl’s domestic role. Central to that role is knowledge of her place in relation to other human beings and to God.

Tauhid and Allah Miyan

The apex of the hierarchic pyramid is God himself. Thanawi holds that his fellow Muslims, through their adherence to customary practices, have compromised what should be the chief end of their existence: the lived expression of their belief in *tauhid*, the unity of God, who is above all. The opening list of correct beliefs makes this clear. Other powers have been raised to gods: saints, *imams*, and masters who do not intercede for their followers but themselves answer

prayers. Believers trapped in routines of elaborate ceremony, of self-devised customs tied to sacred times and sacred places, think that their own strategies can secure desired ends; custom controls God. The demands of custom lead to moral corruption—pride, extravagance, indulgence, license. Custom supplants the correct occupation of Muslims, namely, relentless attention to the requirements of the *shari'at* that affirm the primacy of God.

The God of *tauhid* is described in Thanawi's list of beliefs in Book One, in his unity, self-sufficiency, omnipotence, timelessness, and creativity; "no one can know the subtlety of his being." The first practice sentence for the reader learning to write is "Fear God." The torment of hellfire for those who do not show this fear is a thread running through the entire work.

What is the relation of a person to the judgment of this God? Can God's favor be earned? And how can one know if it has been earned or not? The balance between works and grace, a problem for both reformist Christianity and Indic *bhakti*, is evident here as well. To suggest that the believer can earn God's favor through good works defies the common sense of those whose standard is the perfect law of the *shari'at* and the perfect example of the Prophet. Moreover, it limits the absolute power of a God who is not bound by any human action. If God is all-powerful and knows what is ordained, what power of choice does the human actor have? And what of reward? Is reward to be found in this life, a prosperous existence the confirmation of righteousness? Or does an inscrutable God make no such evident confirmation, perhaps even visiting those he loves with special trials?

These issues are not explicitly raised in the *Bihishti Zewar*, a work intended for a popular audience. Elsewhere, the Deobandis interpret illness and misfortune, for example, as meaningful visitations from God. Whatever complexity one may understand intellectually, however, emotionally and temperamentally Thanawi's emphasis is on human responsibility and human capacity to choose the good and receive divine reward, not only in the afterlife but also in the immediate world of everyday life. This tidy expectation of reward may seem psychologically and morally facile, but it is true to the urgency of Thanawi's message.

The God of such interactions is at once the awe-inspiring God of formal doctrine and the God of predictable human responses, the stern and demanding father, Allah Miyan. This title for God is an unusual one, apparently unique to Urdu, with no equivalent in languages such as Arabic or Persian.⁷⁵ To call Allah "Allah Miyan" is to make him comprehensible and familiar, to anthropomorphize the Absolute, as

Muslims have characteristically sought to avoid. The term *miyan* means “lord” or “master” and is an everyday word in Urdu. It is used in a familiar way of saying “husband and wife” (*miyan-biwi*); as a title appended to a given name, often becoming part of that name (Ahmad Miyan); as a title for older menials (as *bare miyan*); and as a term of affection for children. The term imputes human emotions to God and renders him familiar, as do English phrases like “the dear Lord” or “the good Lord.”

This term underscores a theology posited on the notion that human behavior is decisive in the relationship to God; it is that behavior that secures his approval or elicits his anger. Thanawi writes in the ninth point of his list of beliefs in Book One: “Allah Miyan is angry with works of sin and happy with works meriting reward.” The phrase is used to cajole the reader into good behavior, as a parent cajoles a child: “Say your prayers and make Allah Miyan happy.” Allah Miyan, moreover, is depicted as demonstrating his happiness concretely and materially on the believer’s behalf.

In Book One, Thanawi retells four dramatic stories from the *hadis*. In the original *hadis* compilations, the first three are organized to illustrate issues related to *zakat*, the requisite tithe. Injunctions to charity are at the very heart of the earliest Qur’anic ethical teachings: Muhammad fervently inveighed against oppression by the rich, the hardness of heart, and the contempt for the poor that Islam sought to end. To give charity is to acknowledge one’s dependence on God, to cultivate humility, to free oneself of the trammels of greed. In the stories told here, the rewards of charity are shown as marvels, physically realized and embodied. In the first story, beneficent rain miraculously falls on the person who is just, the man who gives one-third of his crop to charity. In the second story, well-being is the direct gift of God, a gift that can literally disappear when the recipient shows hardness of heart. In the third story, most marvelous of all, a denial of charity, even with the best intentions, turns the hoarded meat into a stone. This transformation turns out to be a blessing to the Prophet’s household, for had the meat been eaten, the heart of the eater, not the meat, would have become the stone that callousness to the poor represents.

The physicality or materialism of reward and punishment almost suggests an autonomous physics of cause and effect. Book One concludes with two lists, the worldly losses and worldly gains caused by sin and virtue, respectively. A sinner is, the list notes, a person who lacks sense and is defective in knowledge. She therefore is agitated at the thought of God, lacks the grace of repentance, and loses even the ability to distinguish sin. God holds her in contempt, the Prophet

reproaches her, the angels decline to intercede on her behalf. But that is not all. Beyond these rather abstract effects, she herself deteriorates socially and physically. She is agitated in the presence of the righteous, and her relationships are disrupted. Her heart, intriguingly, becomes physically weak, and the weakness spreads to her whole body. There is no perplexity here about how the evil flourish. Instead, it is the sinner who has insufficient income, whose crops fail, and who sees the beneficent rain fall not on herself but on the godly. The karmalike sense of inexorable recompense goes beyond one's life, as illustrated in the denunciation of dancing at the beginning of Book Six: the person who organizes dancing is responsible for the sin of every person involved; if any guest emulates the host, the host bears the sin for that; and on and on. The same point is made in the seventh *hadis* quoted in Book Seven.

The one hundred one *hadis* presented in that book, selected by Thanawi from the thousands available, are chosen to illustrate the promise of reward and the threat of punishment. At least half specifically mention heaven or hell. Others describe acts of merit and acts of sin. Often, the punishments or rewards suggest a kind of poetic justice: a person who acts in order to be spoken well of will have her faults spoken of at Judgment (number three); a person who looks around during a prayer may have her sight taken away (number twenty); the person who unjustly encroaches on another's land will be yoked with all seven divisions of the earth (number thirty-five); whoever exposes the faults of a fellow Muslim will have her faults exposed (number forty-six); whoever reproaches someone for a fault will commit the same fault before she dies (number forty-eight); God will help the work of a person who helps the work of a fellow Muslim (number fifty-five); an eavesdropper can expect molten lead in her ears at Judgment (number sixty-two); a backbiter's crime is rendered literal, and she will be forced to eat carrion as she once "ate the living" (number seventy-two). The appended morals in some cases stress punishment and reward or note particular examples of sins prevalent in Thanawi's milieu.

The physicality of sin is also dramatically represented in two vivid and unforgettable images in these *hadis*. The nineteenth *hadis* calls on the believer to perform the prayer carefully and wholeheartedly. If she does not, the prayer is black and lusterless. "The prayer itself says, 'May God destroy you as you have destroyed me,' until it reaches its special place acceptable to God. Then, wrapped like an old cloth, it is struck against the face of the worshipper." The sixty-seventh *hadis* denounces curses: "A curse directed at another person rises toward heaven, whose doors are closed. Then it descends to the

earth, which is also closed. Then it wanders right and left and, when it finds a place nowhere, arrives at the person cursed. If that person deserves to be cursed, fine. If not, the curse falls upon the curser." These selections culminate in three ringing calls to remember Judgment. In the last, the Prophet weeps "until his blessed beard was wet with tears. . . . I swear by that Being in whose power is my life that if you knew what I know about the afterlife, you would flee to the wilderness and place dust on your head." The book then continues with the portents of the final days and the powerful and evocative description of Judgment itself.

Each woman has the power to choose. In the beliefs listed in Book One, point nine is clear: "Almighty God has given will and understanding to his servants so that by their own will they can do works of sin and works meriting reward." The central theme of Book Seven, on human formation, argues a theory of the potential for right action inherent in every human being and sets out techniques for developing that potential. But God is a God of mercy. When the dead gather before him, hungry and thirsty, distraught because of the heat, Muhammad will be able to intercede, and Judgment will begin. When the scale is set and each person's account taken, all prophets, scholars, saints, martyrs, memorizers of the Qur'an, and virtuous people will intercede again: "Whoever has the tiniest manifestation of faith in their hearts will be taken out of hell and sent to paradise." We learn too (especially in the concluding section of Book Six) that others can contribute to the balance of good deeds for the dead by praying to God to assign the merit for their acts of piety not to their own record but to the records of those who have gone before.

As for reward in this life, the major argument insists that the good will receive tangible reward now, although a minor strand acknowledges that the just do in fact suffer. A *hadis* suggesting the redemptive power of suffering for those who are faithful creeps into the collection in Book Seven (number ninety-four). Similarly, the stories of exemplary women in Book Eight are filled with cases of terrible hardship endured by people who are good. Suffering then serves as an occasion for the righteous to learn and to manifest the litany of virtues celebrated in these stories: chastity, trust, gratitude, courage, patience in adversity, discrimination, unworldliness, selflessness, forgiveness, and love. There is, in the end, no simple correlation of virtue and worldly comfort. But Providence is always there. Either the virtuous are rewarded on a later occasion, or it is assumed that they receive their reward in the world to come.

Shari'at and the Bondage of Custom

The goal of the *Bihishti Zewar* is to set out the teachings of the *shari'at*, whose fulfillment merits reward. To make those teachings understood, Maulana Thanawi describes in detail the network of custom that, in the reformers' view, had done no less than create an alternate *shari'at* of its own. The real *shari'at*, ordained by God and perfectly congruent with human nature if properly understood, is the road that leads to individual and social harmony and well-being. The false *shari'at* of custom is its opposite. Far from being authentic and natural, it is the product of human willfulness and artificiality. It too is a road—not the straight road of *shari'at* but the convoluted dead end of *bid'at*, the reprehensible innovation that is the negative counterpart of the *sunna* toward which the *shari'at* leads.

Roughly the first half of the *Bihishti Zewar* (following the introduction) leads the young female reader through extraordinarily detailed teachings on the religious law. Precisely because they are normative Hanafi teachings, these are the sections emphasized in the existing English translations used by women and men; they are as relevant for Muslims today in the United Kingdom or South Africa (who may know only English) as they were for the north Indian Muslims of Thanawi's day. These sections contain some discussions of important local issues, such as specific marriageable categories. But, overall, little of this legal material reflects its immediate environment. As I explain below, these sections are not translated here, in part because of their availability in English elsewhere.

The organization of the teachings on religious law follows the conventional division of books of *fiqh*, first presenting those issues that define the relations between the believer and Allah—the acts of obedience or worship known as *ibadat*, including ablution (ritual purity is required for the prayer), the canonical prayer, the fast of Ramazan, the tithes of *'ushr* and *zakat*, and the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca. This is followed by discussion of issues involving relations among humans, *mu'amalat*, also ordered by divine decree. Book Four covers family law, including marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. Book Five deals with commercial transactions, important even for housebound women, who handled their own finances and the finances of the family; Islamic law has always treated women as legally autonomous.

The rules for ritual worship, one might note, set norms for the ordinary believer that would mark extreme piety in many other traditions. The believer is expected to rise before dawn to pray; to punctu-

ate the day with additional prayer; to keep an absolute daytime fast for a full month, even in the long, hot days of summer, if Ramazan falls then; and to undertake, if possible, the *hajj* to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

The rules of *fiqh*, which systematically present the *shari'at*, are highly logical and rational, and Thanawi covers them in exhaustive detail. For example, the discussion in Book Two of bathing the dead includes not only elaborate details of exactly how the bath is to be done but also all possible contingencies, in all logical permutations and combinations: what to do if proper water is not available; if one is able to bathe the corpse only once and not three times; if no male is available to bathe a male, or a female to bathe a female; if the deceased died of drowning; if only parts of the body were found; if it is not clear that the deceased was a Muslim; if the deceased was non-Muslim but a relative; if the deceased was a corrupt person or a rebel or an apostate; if the deceased was a stillborn baby or a fetus (at a variety of stages) or died in the process of birth; and so forth. Issue after issue is explored in similar detail.

Conventional wisdom might expect that Islamic reform, like Christian reform, would see a diminution of concern with ritual. In fact, the opposite is the case. If one looks at Muslim social experience in this century, a reformist emphasis on ritual has had an impact rather like that of Islamic teaching in the period of the Prophet. It has moved believers from parochial ties, cultural and religious, to a common standard of practice (and ethics) that has provided a basis for community in the new urban and international contexts of modern life. Ritual serves, moreover, in an Islamic perspective, to provide the *sine qua non*, the requisite framework, for all spiritual life. As Book Seven demonstrates, religious law alone gives structure and shape to the inner life; the two domains are not separable. It is not possible to argue that one can focus on good works or the spirit of the religion and not bother with "meaningless" ritual. The notion of "mere ritual" is alien to mainstream, and particularly to reformist, Islam.

A recent study argues that Islamic ritual is essentially "reformational," a quality that can of course be obscured but that, in a context of reform, can assume central importance.⁷⁶ The ritual is not priestly, but popular, and it depends on individual initiative. It is not confined and hedged about by notions of magical efficaciousness. It spills over into much of daily living, shaping an entire month of everyday activity or, in the case of the tithe, cleansing in principle all of one's wealth, for *zakat* on ill-gotten gains would be unworthy. Many of the rituals are associated with particular prayers of ethical import, for example, the

sacrifice at Mecca, which reminds the worshipper that God is the giver of all and that the poor require charity. All of the core rituals have a dimension that is involved in creating community: the joining together for prayer, the shared experience of the fast, the charity involved in the tithing, the gathering of the community at Mecca. But normative ritual—unlike custom, with its proliferation of notions of sacred time and space and its concerns with magical efficaciousness—lends itself to the kind of interior religion that can be practiced in any setting and that is widespread in many traditions during periods of geographic and social mobility, like the recent past.

One can imagine, moreover, the sense of mastery that access to the information on ritual and daily life, presented in convenient form, would provide for a woman and the authority such knowledge would give her in whatever society she found herself. We need not see such obligations as primarily constraining or restricting. The ideal of the *shari'at* gives rhythm and pattern to life, a marking of events and seasons with divinely instituted actions and responses. Islamic teachings are understood as being as natural to humans as their cycles and habits are to the rest of creation.

In Thanawi's tradition, to be natural is not to be unfettered but rather to be like the animals and plants and inanimate objects of nature, in the sense of following ordained cycles and habits. For humans, those cycles and habits are the revealed religious law, which they choose either to follow or to thwart. A normal person, Maulana Thanawi explains, therefore hates sin just as she hates what goes against her nature (*tabi'at*). Thanawi can explain the existence of custom only by concluding that a curtain has fallen over people's reason. People today, he says, are like children whose intelligence has not been developed and who are misled into eating the sweets that make them sick. Intelligence, or sense, if properly cultivated, in this tradition does not provide an autonomous authenticating source. It means reasoned discrimination of the law of God, so that what one knows by sense one also knows by correct knowledge of *shari'at*.⁷⁷ The reasonable, the natural, and the divinely revealed thus coalesce.

The term "custom" does not describe trivial or minor practices that are peripheral to social and personal life. Custom infiltrates all aspects of life, just as the *shari'at* is meant to do: it shapes human relations; it colors all life-cycle and calendrical ceremonies; it structures the believer's relationship to God, the saints, and the dead. But, in Thanawi's view, custom is not at the heart of the natural and divine order; rather, it is the product of human willfulness and speculation, leading people not to their authentic selves but to distorted shadows of what they are meant

to be. The possibility that customary practices are integrative and functional (as I discuss in the Translator's Introduction to Book Six) is wholly irrelevant to Thanawi.

In discussing custom, Thanawi uses to perfection the literary device of irony. Even the three subdivisions of Book Six play on setting up the point of view of the readers, only to show how very far off the mark it in fact is. The subdivisions are based on ascending degrees of popular approval. The first section examines those customs that all Muslims deem sinful but inconsequential. The second section, the longest, describes those customs wrongly regarded as legitimate. The final section lists practices considered not only legitimate but actually deserving of reward. One might expect the customs to be organized by origin, for the period during which the book was written saw a deepening attempt by reformers on both sides to eliminate the mixing of practices now labeled "Hindu" or "Muslim." Indeed, Maulana Thanawi, more often than reformers who preceded him in the nineteenth century, does at times point out that a particular custom is borrowed from the Hindus. Other customs might have been identified as the product of Shi'i influence or corruptions in sufi practice. But focusing instead on skewed understandings is consistent with Thanawi's overriding theme: knowledge is the source of all else, and people will recognize true knowledge if only their minds are clear and the case is properly made. Thanawi wants to expose each category of custom as being far different from what it is popularly understood to be.

Thanawi systematically runs a single ironic metaphor through his discussion: he calls custom itself a *shari'at* and juxtaposes the vocabulary of the sacred law with the self-devised law of customary practice. Nothing could better show the vacuity of customary practices than presenting them in the language of the *shari'at*, which they in fact destroy. When cast in these terms, the distance between foolishness and truth is presumably even more apparent. Customary gifts and dues are consistently referred to as being a *farz-i wajib*, a necessary obligation. A woman makes an intention (*niyat*), as she is required to do as a prelude to a ritual act, before the most trivial of undertakings. Thanawi often describes how customs are considered more important and more a source of pride than are the rituals of the faith.

Maulana Thanawi writes ironically about the shares given to the female singer and to the barber's wife as being more of an obligation than the tithes of *zakat* and *'ushr*. In another reversal, he insists that the practice of "showing the face" during the marriage ceremony has been turned into a religious duty and that anyone who does not do it is regarded as shameless: "They act as shocked as if a Muslim had 'turned

infidel'!" The practice of putting rice pudding in the bride's hand, he says, is more important than whether the girl has ever in her life had the grace of the canonical prayer. Muslims have created an alternate law and reversed all categories. During the marriage festivities, "all sins and immodesty become 'legally permitted' (*halal*) and proper," he concludes.

The misconstrual of these customs is highlighted in one of Maulana Thanawi's particularly striking passages, in which he discusses the custom of keeping the new bride immobile in her husband's home. Only if someone happens to make arrangements for her does she read the canonical prayer. Mocking this as the practice of an alternate school of law, he writes, "In the 'law school' (*mazhab*) of women, there is no permission for her to arise or to ask anyone else to make preparations for the prayer [or even] for her to move here and there." Such a juxtaposition—*mazhab* and no prayer—makes its own point.

Nearly as striking as the use of legal vocabulary to describe custom is the use of Sanskrit-derived vocabulary to describe this counter-*shari'at*. This is a *man-gharat*, a self-devised *shari'at*; the details of ceremonies are *man-samjhautiyah*, self-devised schemes or rationalizations. Urdu draws, of course, on both a Sanskrit and a Perso-Arabic vocabulary, typically emphasizing the latter in documents of a religious nature. In using these Sanskrit terms to describe this "*shari'at*," Thanawi subtly suggests how far from *shari'at* it actually is. The range of Urdu vocabulary allows for other ironic usages: referring, for example, as Thanawi often does, to customary ceremonial visitations as *a'o bhagat* ("O come, *bhagat* [a Hindu holy man]"), an ironic term for hospitality.

The central metaphor of custom as a reversed *shari'at* is supplemented by detailed descriptions of other kinds of reversal. Thanawi is horrified by the confusion he sees on every side: social roles are confused, things that are not sacred are treated as if they were; obligations that are sacred are ignored; saints and holy men are elevated while God is not given his due. A hierarchic society of reciprocal obligations, of expected material and personal exchanges is in his view being subverted. Thanawi envisions this society (discussed in more detail in the Translator's Introduction to Book Six) as nothing less than a prison. He refuses to agree that people take up these practices voluntarily, and he repeatedly insists that people are compelled to do so, acting no more voluntarily than the victim who submits to the thief's gun. As he describes the ensnarement of the hapless husband of a corrupt wife in Book One, the entrapment of porters who are beaten and abused in the section on women's outings, and the solitary confinement, or "black hole," faced by a new bride, he makes clear his feelings that the

reversed boundaries of custom, far from making life meaningful and joyous, in fact destroy what life should be: “Sinful deeds and worry about reputation can become a noose around your neck.”

The depth of Thanawi’s feeling is measured not only by the disapproval—even contempt—with which he presents custom but also by the confidence and serenity with which he presents the example of a life ceremony, a wedding, properly observed. Although he insists that description of a contemporary reformed wedding should not be necessary for anyone who has followed his argument, he offers a vignette of a wedding recently performed. Insisting that this was the kind of wedding any respectable family could take pride in—not the wedding of *maulawis* or dervishes or of people so poor they had no choice—he describes the circumstances and episodes, from the engagement to the settling in at the groom’s home. In this wedding, boundaries are clear: people are where they should be, time is organized normally, money is spent appropriately. There is “peace and calm” throughout; there is “no tempest.” It is hard not to be moved by Maulana Thanawi’s evident feeling and sincerity: “There was a luster and sweetness [to this wedding] that words cannot describe. With God’s grace, all who observed it were happy.”

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that Thanawi saw custom in much the same way that sixteenth-century Protestant reformers in Europe saw the indulgences and other corruptions of the Roman church—as a distraction from pristine teachings. In both cases, reformers regarded history as having followed a downward course, with the present being an especially low point and the only hope a kind of cyclical return to original teachings. The Christian reformers asserted that the church, in its emphasis on works at the cost of faith and grace, had distorted the image of God and had placed the church, not God, in control of salvation. Thanawi similarly identified custom as an attempt to control God, in this case through public display, auguries, omens, soothsaying, and charms that took the place of fidelity and trust. Custom is, therefore, *shirk*, the joining of partners to God. Saints and *imams*, instead of being exemplars, guides, and intercessors, become themselves the rivals of God. Custom is personified for Thanawi as a monster whose tentacles reach everywhere: “Bravo, O Custom, how mighty you are! May God banish you from our land!”

To banish custom, the reformers must control women. “*Righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in their husbands’ absence what Allah would have them guard.*”⁷⁸ Women are capable of righteousness and obedience, but they must be guarded by men or by their own disciplined will to prevent the irresponsibility or disgrace to which they

may otherwise succumb. Enlightening women strikes deeply into personal relations and the patterns of everyday life. Powerful themes coalesce, themes of control and self-control and of distance from the very world that gives one birth.

The changes Maulana Thanawi urged were significant, both in his time and in regard to such critical issues as literacy, which is even today far from being attained. Thanawi certainly never questioned women's domestic role. Indeed, in standing up to those who accused him of thwarting hierarchy—or of turning girls into *maulawis*, like men—his defense was that only an educated girl could fulfill her role properly, know what is owed to herself and to others, and know her proper relation to God. Nothing inherent limited her from developing intellectual skills or from cultivating the highest ideals of moral virtues.⁷⁹

The urgency in defining woman's place—with all its ambiguous implications—was part of an attempt to stabilize a correct hierarchy in all areas. In a period of alien rule and disruptive change, the reformers were driven to establish boundaries for belief and behavior that would ensure order among humans and between humans and God. Women were to be subordinate to men, children to their elders, the humble to the great: deference on the one side, right-dealing and protection on the other. Proper hierarchy had to extend from earth to heaven. No one should assert her status to defy divine law. No one should exalt holy men or *imams* to equal God, Allah Miyan, the great elder who must also be pleased.⁸⁰

Maulana Thanawi wrote as someone troubled by the world around him, troubled not by change per se but by change that threatened the cultivation of proper Islamic lives in a society properly ordered. He saw himself, as did other reformers of his day, as one in a chain, stretching over the centuries of those who call Muslims—now, explicitly, Muslim women as well as Muslim men—back to the model of Prophetic life, the model from which fallible humans so frequently stray.

* * *

The *Bihishti Zewar* remains an instrument of that call. It is very much a living document, annotated, enlarged, modified, and commented on by successive generations of scholars and publishers. At the simplest level, such sections as the explanation of the workings of the post office are not frozen in time but have been brought up to date in new editions. New problems have been raised: for example, the form of salutation to be used for teachers in secular schools in independent India. There has been over the years ever greater refinement in setting

an Islamic norm; Persianate salutations in letters have given way to simple Islamic ones. In general, the editions are increasingly annotated. Much of the annotation provides a scholarly apparatus, a citation of Qur'an, *hadis*, and other texts characteristic of all the writings of the *'ulama* in the contentious atmosphere of internal Muslim debate in this century. Although I have translated the earliest available edition, I have indicated in notes some later emendations.

The detailed history of the impact of this work—and of other works like it—remains to be written. As noted above, however, the audience of the *Bihishti Zewar* has also changed. Once a document for the privileged families who supported the reformist movement, over time it has been read by the more humble and the more remote. Currently, in English translation, it is a document for Muslim migrants to the West and for their children who no longer know Muslim languages. Parts of the work are now little read. No fewer than four recent translations into English, for example, are notable for emphasizing the legal injunctions and giving little attention to those sections that were primarily meaningful in the context of turn-of-the-century Muslim India.⁸¹

This emphasis is sensible, given the audience of these translators, but the resulting editions omit material that is rich in content for those concerned with religious change, social history, and women's studies—material that is offered in the translation that follows.