Islamic scholar seen as both heroine and heretic
SARAH MALIK, Sydney Morning Herald, 27 February 2010

Islamic scholar Amina Wadud has been branded both a heroine and a heretic.

Heroine for her academic framework for Muslims in legal and policy reform around the world; heretic for leading a mixed gender prayer in New York in 2005 which made worldwide headlines.

The prayer session propelled the 58-year-old African American into celebrity Muslim reformer status, a position the theologian does not seem entirely comfortable with.

“I try to keep my sense of humour about it," she said, speaking in Sydney after engagements in Melbourne and Canberra.

"I didn't play into it. I didn't stoke the sensationalism of it.

“The time was a little bit comical but I could not live along those lines. I like the basic parts of my life where you have anonymity.”

Asked if the controversy had obscured her long-time activism and scholarship on Islam and gender issues, she said: “I regret things being obscured for any reason. But I do not regret the prayer if that is reason why people obscure things. People have not been pleased with my work for a long time. So the prayer is just a ruse ... and ... excuse for not listening to what you have to say.”

Dr Wadud is the author of several books, including Quran and Women: Re-reading the sacred text from a woman's perspective and Inside Gender Jihad: Women's reform in Islam.

Her central thesis is that for centuries Islam has been interpreted by male scholars which has obscured its essentially egalitarian ethos. This ethos, Dr Wadud says, has inspired her reform work particularly around Islamic family law.

While her religious detractors accuse her of heresy, other criticisms of Dr Wadud involve the charge that she feeds into the never-ending contestation of religious texts which has no purpose in the modern era within a secular framework. However, her books have worked as a framework for Muslim activists, particularly through lobby groups and her organisation, Sisters in Islam in Malaysia.

One of Dr Wadud's central ideas is that as a believer she accepts the divinity of the Qur'an, however, its readings must always be open to scrutiny and re-evaluation. This is particularly important if laws are to be based on its precepts and have impact in the real world on women's lives.

Born in the American South, in Maryland in 1952, to a Methodist preacher father, Dr Wadud converted to Islam at university at the age of 20 after a brief stint as a practicing Buddhist.

“I was a practicing Buddhist for a year," she said.

"I came across Islam and it grew exponentially and I came to an understanding of the

universe that worked for me.”

The liberation theology of the black leaders of the civil rights movement and her own upbringing also influenced her.

“My family situation was one where the relationship between social injustice and faith was explicit. You do not oppress. Oppression is against God's will,” she said.

“I grew up in the era of black consciousness. I lived in a transformative time as a young person- you could hear and feel you had a certain sense of social responsibility - a mandate to fight to remove injustice as it was being established in the context of our lives as African Americans.

“I was brought up in the revolutionary spirit of justice and it was common sense to transfer that in terms of Islam and gender justice.”

Dr Wadud, a devout and thoughtful woman, finds much of the hype around her work distasteful, so much so that at one point she eschewed the label 'feminist' altogether.

“There are obviously large sectors of non-Muslim and Muslim population who think Islamic feminism is an oxymoron," she said.

“I am less concerned now about whether or not I make everyone comfortable in terms of the self designation (of being feminist) than at another point."

She said the term 'feminism' often led people to dismiss her work.

" ... I feel a little bit more comfortable in my own skin being able to say feminist. At another point [I would avoid the label] in order to avoid the politics of the discussion and to avoid the marginalisation of my work into those politics,” Dr Wadud said.

This perceived incompatibility is incongruous with her own study of Islamic thought and philosophical thinking.

“They are limiting feminism from its own intellectual and political history," she said. "They are also limiting Islam from its own egalitarian trajectory."

Dr Wadud has found crowd hostility toward her more pointed in Sydney than Melbourne, where the largely Muslim audience seemed much more engaged.

Her lecture this week at the University of Technology, Sydney, involved several heated exchanges with young men.

“Some people in the Australian audiences, they come because they've heard there is something wrong or bad or evil about me," she said.

"They come because they will set me straight. When they get here and I don't say anything outrageous for them to pick up on - they make up stuff.”

Dr Wadud finds arguments with those who have not even read her ideas tiring and is now focussed on reaching out to those who have.

“In the past “In the past I felt a much greater responsibility to be understood by as many people as possible,” she said.

“You spent all your time trying to convert people who are absolutely unconvinced about where you're going.

"Then there are some people who are trying to understand certain things and have a nominal level of agreement and maybe want to go further and engage with your ideas. That's a more interesting level to engage."

There have been rumours of death threats, but Dr Wadud is quick to clear the air.

“I never received any death threats,” she laughs.

“There was this thing where people got into saying I had death threats. But I never had anyone actually threaten me.”