

Interpreting religion and tradition

Asma Barlas

I think it's fair to say that historically patriarchies have abused both sacred and secular knowledge to discriminate against women. In religious patriarchies, the ideological source of women's oppression are misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts which allege that God "Himself" has established men as rulers over women. In secular patriarchies knowledge of disciplines like biology and psychology have been used to argue that men and women are not just biologically different, but also unequal.

I should clarify that by patriarchy I mean a system of sexual hierarchy and inequalities that privileges men over women both in their biological capacity as males and in their social roles of fathers and husbands. In religious patriarchies, this system draws on a masculinized representation of God as male and, in the case of Christianity, as Father. Such representations then serve as a justification for rule by the father/husband over women. Interestingly, even those religious groups that don't sacralize God as Father—like Muslims—nonetheless buy into the legitimacy of father's/husband's rule.

Some feminists argue that the problem lies in the nature of religion itself, specially in the worship of God as against goddesses. They make this claim on the grounds that societies that worshipped goddess cults were egalitarian. Truthfully, however, such societies were also misogynistic and men, not women, were the real locus of power in them. Consider the ancient Greeks who, in spite of strong female goddesses in their pantheon, believed that women were just lesser men who lacked the ability to reason. On this basis, they excluded women from public and political life and the rights extended to men.

Further, as the work of an increasing number of Muslim scholars shows, the Qur'an does not teach us that God is a male (as it states, God is unlike anything created) or privilege males. To the contrary, it affirms the ontological equality of the sexes. The problem, therefore, does not lie with religion, but with how we choose to interpret it. And this leads me to make several observations:

Every religion is open to both oppressive or liberatory, reactionary or progressive, interpretations; therefore if only repressive readings becomes dominant in a given society, we need to question why.

History shows that the dominant ideologies in a given society reflect the interests of the dominant groups in that society. Similarly, readings of a sacred text, or of tradition, that become hegemonic in patriarchal society also serve the interests of the males in that society inasmuch as they legitimize men's power over women.

However, since religion, tradition (and history) are always plural, their egalitarian aspects have to be repressed in order to underwrite the hegemony of repressive interpretations. Repression can involve force (e.g., the Taliban) but also consent, which is achieved by the "tendency of public discourse to make some forms of experience readily available to

consciousness while ignoring or suppressing others” (T.J. Jackson-Lears. “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities.” *American History Review*. 90, no. 3 (1985): 567-593.) If people constantly are confronted with only one type of reading of sacred texts (or, of history or any other subject), they find it hard to imagine alternatives.

When some people do offer new interpretations of religion (or tradition, or of knowledge itself), their work is marginalized while they can be threatened, specially in states that have authoritarian and repressive regimes.

Conservatives in particular resist and condemn new readings of sacred texts and tradition because of their fear that such readings will undermine the legitimacy of interpretations inherited from the past, most of which are anti-women. In the name of tradition and religious purity, they obstruct the development of religious knowledge, forcing a sort of stasis upon it.

Since, to conservatives, women symbolize and embody tradition, they fight to “protect” women from such ostensibly corrupting influences. As we’ve witnessed, women’s bodies become the battlefield in the struggle to define the legitimate and illegitimate, the authentic and inauthentic. (Among Muslims, for example, notions of sexual modesty extend only to discussions about “the veil” and always exclude the Qur’an’s provisions for male sexual modesty that are just as significant.)

All this has resulted in turning many people away from religion and tradition altogether. This is troubling for two reasons. First, it shows that they’ve bought into the same oppressive readings of religion and tradition that they condemn. Secondly, by vacating the field, the more progressive elements have left it open to extremists, whose power thus is magnified beyond their small numbers. That is why I believe that religious extremism is the creation of not only extremists, but also of moderate and progressive believers.

Sadly, in countries where literacy (defined minimally as the ability to read and write one’s own name) is in the range of 15-20% , where three quarters of the population lives in rural areas with feudal vestiges, and where female feticide has become popular, any talk of reinterpreting religion may seem irrelevant. But, one of the costs of not doing so is to allow many men to continue oppressing, abusing, and killing women in the name of religion or honor. And yet, perhaps the very existence of such heinous practices makes it all the more necessary for decent people to come together to fight them.

Progressive Muslim need to understand that the best way to challenge repression carried out in the name of Islam is from within Islam itself. Many of the rights and freedoms that they crave can also be derived from an enlightened reading of the Qur’an, but we have to learn to read it in such a way as to be able to recover its radically egalitarian message of equality, personal freedom from coercion, and tolerance for diversity.

(Edited and rewritten version of a talk given at the US embassy in New Delhi via digital video, from Ithaca, New York.)