

Islam, women, and equality (part III)

Asma Barlas

(This is the final in a series of essays, deriving from a talk I gave at Ithaca College on my book, on March 19th. The previous two were published on April 8 and April 22.)

If, as I have argued, the Qur'an does not endorse theories of male privilege and female inferiority and subordination, then the question becomes why haven't Muslims read it as an antipatriarchal and liberatory text? I want to address this problem, as well as the larger issue of interpretation, in the last part of my talk.

I believe that the reason Muslims have failed to read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal text has to do with "who has read it (basically men), the contexts in which they have read it (basically patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it (basically one that ignores the hermeneutic and theological principles that the Qur'an suggests for its own reading)" (Asma Barlas, "Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam," Anderberg Lecture, University of Nebraska, 2002).

Much of the religious knowledge Muslims regard as canonical today is the product of a method that has been described as linear, atomistic, and hermeneutically flawed. However, because of how religious knowledge and authority came to be structured in Muslim societies historically, most Muslims continue to regard these interpretations and this methodology as Islamic.

Much of this religious knowledge also was produced by male scholars in the first few centuries of Islam which were coterminous with the medieval period of European history. Even though Muslim civilization was at its zenith during this period of European decline, this was nonetheless an era of enormous misogyny that was cross-cultural and inter-national in its scope.

Added to this is the fact that many of the Qur'an's provisions threatened existing relationships of power between women and men and between the rulers and the ruled and produced a strong conservative resistance that extended to deradicalizing parts of its message very early on. For instance, Fatima Mernissi shows how many Muslim men tried to misread the verses that extended inalienable rights to women (*The Veil and the Male Elite*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

Similarly, Louise Marlow argues that as early as the second Islamic century, Muslim ulema had begun to dilute the egalitarian impulse in various parts of tradition, by justifying hierarchical "models of kingship" in a society whose Scripture extolled the virtues of egalitarianism. Thus, the ulama who had "gained incontestable possession of the moral high ground [refused to] translate the antihierarchical and antiauthoritarian moral at the heart of their scholarly tradition into an active social and political opposition." Instead, they sought to justify not only hierarchies, but quietism as well, even though some of them "felt obliged to defend their quietism, since it was activism that had been suggested most strongly by early Muslim experience." By the third Islamic century, even Quranic exegesis showed that the egalitarianism once associated with the

Quran had lost its “subversive connotation” (*Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977: 93; 66).

On its part, the early Muslim state also became involved in promoting certain interpretive practices and certain readings of Islam that were oppressive to women. This has been documented by several scholars, including Leila Ahmed, who also points out that different readings of the same texts yield “fundamentally different Islams” for women (*Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, 1992).

All this suggests, of course, that hermeneutical and existential questions are connected and to the extent they are, it is reasonable to argue that one cannot read scriptures in liberatory modes by means of flawed methodologies and in oppressive and antidemocratic circumstances. Many people, including disillusioned Muslims, believe that Islam itself is antidemocratic, but I reject such essentialism because, as my own work shows, a religion is always polysemic (has a multiplicity of meanings) and we can read it in more than one way. To me, then, the more appropriate question becomes “why does a community come to regard certain interpretations and ideas as authentic, authoritative, or canonical?” And that takes us back to such issues as how knowledge itself is produced and the contexts in which it is produced.

If we look at Muslim societies today, we find a rather dismal picture. Most of the regimes in power are viewed by their own people as illegitimate, oppressive, and unIslamic. Moreover, as a result partly of Western support of such regimes and partly of the legacy of Western colonialism, Muslim societies have experienced modernization not as economic development or political freedoms, but as a “coercive secularism” (Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, New York: Modern Library, 2000: 166).

This brings me to how non-Muslim Westerners view Islam and to the role of the US in keeping antidemocratic regimes in power in Muslim societies, and around the world generally. I have argued elsewhere that in spite of a 1,400 year long shared history, and in spite of the fact that Islam is as much a part of Abrahamic monotheism as are Judaism and Christianity, there is very little understanding of Islam in the US and the West. Even and perhaps, especially, in the Academy, only certain types of discourses on Islam get foregrounded that continue to perpetuate ignorant and damaging stereotypes about it.

My own view is that this ignorance “is cultivated, not accidental, and that it arises in an age-old politics of misrecognition that ‘confuses Islam with Muslims, disregards the role of political, economic, cultural, and historical factors in shaping not only Muslim attitudes and actions, but also their readings of Islam, and denies Western complicity in creating many of the conditions that are conducive’ to religious extremism and not just on the part of some Muslims” (Asma Barlas, “Jihad=Holy War=Terrorism: the Politics of Conflation and Denial,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Winter 2003: 1).

In such a milieu, learning about Islam requires unlearning deeply entrenched modes of ignorance and nonrecognition and while some people are open to such a possibility, most can see no stake in it because of the instrumentalist belief that there’s no value in learning about things that don’t

impact their own lives in immediate and tangible ways. However, one of the things 9/11 should have brought home to us—and I intend the pun here—is that even as we secure ourselves behind imaginary borders of inside/outside, in real life, what happens “out there” is likely to have repercussions “in here” sooner or later as well.

This is why I believe US-Americans have a stake in the foreign policies that governments pursue in their names and which, for the most part, are conducive to oppression, not democracy. I also believe that US-Americans have a stake in egalitarian readings of Islam and of their own religions (and secular ideologies, for that matter) because we need to devise more egalitarian modes of “knowing one another,” to use a Qur’anic phrase. In the absence of mutual recognition based in mutual knowledge and understanding, we will be hard put to live peaceably together.