

## On Interpreting the Qur'an (II)

Asma Barlas

In an earlier op-ed, I identified some methodological principles and textual strategies for interpreting the Qur'an that the Qur'an itself calls attention to. Specifically, it asks us to read it as a textual and thematic whole, instead of piecemeal or selectively, hence in a de-contextualized and distorted way. Further, it instructs us to read it for its best meanings, an injunction that clearly recognizes that, like other texts, scriptures also are open to more than one interpretation but that not every interpretation is, in fact, appropriate.

Of course, the Qur'an does not say what it means by "the best," but I assume that is where our moral and ethical sensibilities as believers are put to the test, as is our free will. If the Qur'an were, in fact, framed in terms that left no room for interpretation, then we could not exercise our reasoning and intellect to decipher the Signs of God (ayat), which the Qur'an repeatedly asks us to do. In the absence of such an endeavor on our part, could we treat ourselves, or be viewed by God, as purposive moral agents?

I believe one can arrive at the best meanings of the Qur'an not only by employing the kinds of methodological criteria I have referred to above, but also, and more importantly, by embracing a theologically compelling understanding of God. I am persuaded to argue this way because the doctrine of Divine Unity (*Tawhid*), which is the founding principle of Islam, teaches that there is perfect congruence between Divine Ontology (God's Being) and Divine Discourse (the Qur'an). As such, we cannot properly understand God's Speech in the absence of understanding God, as described in and by the Qur'an. To put it in technical terms, we need to make "God's Self-Disclosure the hermeneutic site from which to read the Qur'an," as I argue in my work (*Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Below, I quote from that work, in which I discuss three aspects of God's Being, or, more appropriately, God's Self-Disclosure, that I believe are crucial for generating the best meanings from the Qur'an, at least in so far as its position on sexual equality is concerned; these are the theologemes of Divine Unity (*Tawhid*), Justness, and Incomparability.

"The principle of *Tawhid* has the most far-reaching implications for how we understand God and God's Speech. Here, I wish to note only its implications for a theory of male rule/privilege that underpins traditional patriarchies. In its simplest form, *Tawhid* symbolizes the idea of God's Indivisibility, hence also the indivisibility of God's Sovereignty; thus, no theory of male (or popular) sovereignty that pretends to be an extension of God's Rule/Sovereignty, or comes into conflict with it, can be considered compatible with the doctrine of *Tawhid*; in fact, this is the axiomatic meaning of the term: that God is Absolute Sovereign and no one can partake in God's Sovereignty. To the extent that theories of male rule over women and children amount to asserting sovereignty over both, and also misrepresent males as intermediaries between women and God, they do come into conflict with the essential tenets of the doctrine of *Tawhid* and must be rejected as theologically unsound. A reading of

the Qur'an that suggests even subtle parallels between God and males, in their capacity as fathers or husbands must then be rejected as an insufferable heresy" (p. 13-14).

A second foundational principle of God's Self-Disclosure is that, while strict in justice, God does not transgress against the rights given to humans; in other words, God does not commit *zulm* against people. Interestingly, while practicing Muslims accept this fact, most seem to see no contradiction in reading various forms of *zulm* into God's Speech (the Qur'an) by interpreting it in sexist and misogynistic ways.

Of course, people will disagree about what *zulm* is as well as about the proper definition of human rights, but one cannot reasonably claim that degrading a group of people by treating them unequally does *not* violate their rights and therefore does not constitute *zulm*. Hence, "by teaching the precept of the inherent inferiority of women, which breeds misogyny, and by justifying women's subordination to men, patriarchies also violate women's rights by denying them agency and dignity, principles that the Qur'an says are intrinsic to human nature itself. As such, we can think of patriarchies also as being manifest cases of *zulm*, and to the extent that that is so, we must be willing to assume, again as a hermeneutic principle, that the Qur'an cannot condone them." (In fact, I give additional reasons why the Qur'an does not condone patriarchies in my book.) A reading that projects oppression, inequality, and patriarchy into the Qur'an must be viewed as a "failure in reading, since it attributes *zulm* against women to God" and we must be willing to re-examine an oppressive exegesis "in light of a more ecumenical definition of *zulm* which coheres with the totality of the Qur'an's teachings" about sexual equality (p. 14).

Third, the Qur'an forbids us from using similitude (comparisons) for God because "God is Incomparable, hence Unrepresentable, specially in anthropomorphic terms. The Qur'an's tireless and emphatic rejections of God's sexualization/engenderment as Father (male) confirm that God is not a male, or like one. However, if God is not male or like one, there also is no reason to hold that God has any special affinity with males" (by positing such an affinity, men claim God as their own and project onto God sexual partisanship) (p. 14-15).

The point, in the end, is rather simple: if we embrace a theologically sound view of God as Just, Merciful, above partisanship, and equally accessible to women and men, then we cannot read injustice, partisanship, inequality, and *zulm* against women, into the Qur'an. Those who do, then unwittingly also embrace a degraded view of God, one that egregiously violates the very nature of God's Self-Disclosure in the Qur'an.