

“Will the ‘Real’ Islam Please Stand Up?”*

Asma Barlas

Ever since 9/11, Muslims in the US have been under pressure to identify the “real” Islam. Although this demand seems to suggest a genuine interest in Islam, in this essay, I argue that it is often simply an ideological assault on Muslims, albeit disguised as an innocent quest for knowledge. I also consider whether this is an appropriate question and whether Muslims should respond to it.

“Average Americans” and the “real” Islam

In an essay circulated widely on the internet last October, a man calling himself an “average American” demands to know why, in the wake of 9/11, the media has been bombarding him with instructions

on how I should ‘understand’ Islam? Thanks but no thanks. I really don’t give a rat’s --- about Islam. . . . [If it is true that] these terrorist guys who pulled off the 9/11 attacks don’t really represent the actual Islamic faith . . . why should I be the target audience on what the ‘true’ Islam really is? Shouldn’t the media . . . be instructing these ‘wayward’ Muslims and their followers who have ‘hijacked’ Islam about the true meaning of the Koran and Islam?

After disavowing any interest in Islam, the “average American” nonetheless fires off seven questions at Muslims, of which I will quote only one. Why, he asks, are Muslims making it “sound like there are two versions of the Koran floating around out there. If so, what is the difference between the Koran that the Terrorists are reading, and the Koran that the rest of the Muslim world is reading? . . . I need to have the ‘real’ Islam please stand up.” Even as he demands “direct and specific answers” to his questions, however, the “average American” also makes it clear that he’s not prepared

to hear history about the Crusades, or the US foreign policy crap, or the rage of Muslims, or the Palestinian claims to the same land as the Israelis, or comparisons to Christianity and Judaism, or stories of poverty or hunger, or the CIA . . .and ‘blame the victim’ excuses. . . . At this point, the majority of Americans don’t want to hear excuses. We want action.

I can’t do an extensive reading of this essay here, but I want to make some, perhaps obvious, points about it.

First, the average American clearly holds “Islam” rather than Muslims responsible for 9/11; this is evident from the fact that it is the “real” Islam that he wants to stand up in the wake of 9/11 (notice how he speaks of Islam as if it were a person), as well as from the fact that he rules out the possibility that politics or economics or much of anything else could explain the hijackers’ actions.

This confusion of Islam with Muslims is common enough in the West, but it is restricted only to Islam. Certainly, no one asked the “real Judaism” to stand up after Jewish terrorist groups began the practice of bombing civilians in the Middle East in the 1940s and ’50s. Nor did people ask the “real Christianity” to stand up in the wake of the Crusades, the Conquest, or the slave trade. Nor were there demands for the “real Shintoism” to stand up in the wake of the Japanese kamikaze bombings of World War II.

In fact, we usually explain such events in terms of a mix of political, economic, cultural, historical, and ideological factors. So why ignore history, culture, politics, economics, and ideology where it comes to Muslims? For example, why not interpret 9/11 in terms of a twisted Saudi nationalism, given that bin Laden and most of the hijackers were Saudis?

Second, the average American puts a billion Muslims, to say nothing of Islam itself, on call for the actions of a few men. By this logic, he should blame all Americans for the U.S. bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the Japanese had broadcast their terms of surrender, all Germans for the Holocaust, the whole right-wing for Timothy McVeigh’s actions, etc. How is it that everyone can claim individualized identities, thus being able to disassociate themselves from people with whose actions they disagree, but not Muslims?

Third, the “average American” makes it sound as if the problem of interpretive pluralism and extremism are unique to Islam, as if there are no contestary readings of Judaism and Christianity and no extremist Jews or Christians or secular humanists, for that matter! He thus suggests that there is a radical difference between Muslims and everyone else.

Fourth, his disinterest in Islam does not keep the “average American” from grilling Muslims and while his questions pretend to open up some conversational space, he shuts it down by *a priori* characterizing any sort of response on our parts as an “excuse” and by demanding “action,” not excuses. What this action might entail seems clear from the ever-broadening scope of the “war against terrorism.”

The academic face of Janus

It isn’t just the “average” Americans who is choosing to engage Islam in this way. Consider Bernard Lewis, the noted expert on Islam whose book, *What Went Wrong?* was reviewed by Paul Kennedy in the *New York Times Book Review* (January 27, 2002: 9).

On the cover of *Book Review* the headline is “Islam Builds a Prison And locks itself inside” (notice how the *Review* also speaks about Islam as if it were a person). Inside, the headline is “The Real Culture Wars,” and under it: “Bernard Lewis writes on the conflict between the West and Islam that has been centuries in the making.”

On Lewis’s account, this conflict is the result of the fact that whereas in the 18th century, the US and Western Europe “took off to another world, one that was increasingly secular, democratic, industrial and tolerant . . . the Middle East . . . did not. . . the Muslim world

rested on its laurels—until it was besieged by Western ships, armaments, iron goods and cheap textiles, to all of which it became harder and harder to respond.”

Not only did the Muslim world lag behind, argues Lewis, but it has failed to catch up as is clear from the fact that “Mozart and Shakespeare and Voltaire . . . Stravinsky, jazz, and George Orwell . . . stop at the frontiers of the Arab world, which has shown little interest in how others think, write, compose.”

“What, then, is to be done?” asks Kennedy and answers himself by paraphrasing Lewis: *they* can continue on “a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression,” or, *they* can “abandon grievance and victimhood, settle their differences and join their talents, energies and resources in a common creative endeavor . . . the choice is their own.”

Again, I can’t do an extensive reading of this review, but notice how Lewis also confuses Islam with Muslims and Arabs and, in fact, with the Middle East. The fact that Islam is a religion, Arabs and Muslims a people, and the Middle East a geographic region doesn’t seem to bother him.

Notice, also, his tendency to speak of Muslim societies in terms not of history or politics or economics or culture, but essentializing psychological essences of “hate and spite, rage and self-pity . . . grievance and victimhood.” Is there any single group of people, other than Muslims, about whom anyone could speak in this vein and not be called a racist?

While Lewis wrote his book before 9/11, his view of Muslims also helps to re-present 9/11 in purely religious and psychological terms, like the average American does and, in so doing, lets everyone else off the hook from having to undertake self-critique. In fact, suggesting that we need to rethink policies that may be aiding the political-economy of terrorism immediately evokes the charge of being anti-American.

The points of similarity between Lewis and the average American suggest that they constitute the academic and popular sides of the same coin; in fact, one authorizes and legitimizes the other. After all, would the phrase the “*Real Culture Wars*” have any resonance if there wasn’t a demand to have the “*real*” Islam “stand up?”

So, on the one hand, Muslims are being badgered to define the “real” Islam and, on the other, we’re being told what the “real” Islam is and that too by people who aren’t even Muslims! Aren’t such people as guilty as the terrorists were of hijacking Islam to serve their own ends? And are they really invested in our speaking meaningfully about Islam?

Islam’s reality for Muslims

Even though the public discourse is not conducive for any kind of soul searching on the part of Muslims, or anyone else for that matter, and even though it is silencing Muslims, I believe we have a great deal at stake in continuing to talk about Islam.

I believe, however, that we need to approach the issue of what Islam “really” teaches from a different perspective. For instance, in my work (*Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), I attempt to show that oppressive readings of the Qur’an are a function of who has read it, how, and in what contexts. To be specific, they are the result of the interpretive strategies that Muslims have/have not used to read the Qur’an, as well as of how religious authority has been structured in Muslim patriarchal societies.

Of course, to say that meanings are always contingent—in other words, that knowledge is never independent of the contexts and processes of its own production—is not to say anything new. But, once we recognize the role of human agency and social structures in interpretive processes, the question becomes not “will the real Islam stand up?” but how and why did Muslim identities, consciousnesses, and histories intertwine in specific ways to produce certain readings of Islam rather than others?

This way of framing the question allows us to distinguish between the Qur’an and its exegesis on the one hand, and between religious texts, cultures, and histories on the other, both of which we must learn to do in order to challenge oppressive readings of Islam.

We also must learn to read the Qur’an for its “best meanings,” as the Qur’an itself tells us to do. Such an injunction clearly recognizes that we can read a text in multiple ways but that not all readings of it may be equally appropriate. And, indeed, the Qur’an specifies some criteria for judging between the contextual legitimacy of different readings.

So, our own religion obliges us to define its reality in ever better ways and also to contest militaristic, misogynistic, and oppressive readings of it. (I’m assuming that such readings can’t possibly be the best, unless, of course, we are willing to embrace a completely depraved view of God as oppressive and misogynistic.)

Although I reject the view that all Muslims are responsible for the events of 9/11, I do feel that we all need to challenge interpretive extremism rather than ignoring it or trying to wash our hands off it. I know some Muslims believe that such problems will disappear if we personalize religion, as in the West. I feel this is just an excuse for evading communal responsibility in the name of an enlightened secularism. As we’ve learned from history, personalizing religion has not done away with extremism. It has merely sanctified the myth that what I do with my religious beliefs does not concern others.

I believe a dialogue among Muslims is long overdue, and not just because of 9/11. That is something we owe ourselves, not average Americans.

*This is an edited version of a talk I gave at Yale on February 21, 2002.

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