

Cardozo Law School, Yeshiva University, October 10-12, 2004¹

I would like to thank professor Suzanne Stone for including me in this dialogue on text, tradition, and reason and I am looking forward to our conversation.

Although I am equally interested in all three panels, I felt that I would fit best in the one on "Interpretation and Politics" given the nature of my work. However, I should confess at the outset that I have interpreted the charge to examine "the relationship between interpretive practices and political contexts"² rather broadly. Essentially, I will focus on the interplay between text, tradition, and reason as a way both to critique religious interpretive authority and to talk about a Qur'anic hermeneutics of liberation taking my own reading as an illustration.³

Focusing on authority rather than on the contexts of interpretation allows me not only to offer a richer commentary on some of the questions before us, but also to speak about the challenges I face as a scholar of the Qur'an and as a practicing Muslim who is attempting to live by its precepts. This focus does not mean, of course, that I regard context to be unimportant or irrelevant to Muslim readings of the Qur'an; to the contrary, I accept, a priori, the premise that we always speak, think, read, and act in contexts that are necessarily political.

The conclusion to which my comments are directed is a modest one and I will anticipate it here. I aim to show, first, that in spite of the tensions between text, tradition, and reason, religious authority has been able to inhabit all three to its own advantage and to the disadvantage of female believers. However, I also want to make a second, and opposite case, that a creative engagement with texts, traditions, and reason can also yield a liberatory hermeneutics of the Qur'an.

I. The politics (and elisions) of authority

One of the central points the conference description makes is that the interpretive exercise—whether undertaken in religious contexts or in secular—confronts us with a similar set of issues having to do with who is authorized to interpret texts and which interpretations become authoritative in a given society. At stake, of course, is "the nature of authority and its modes of legitimation."⁴ It seems to

¹ This is a slightly amended version of the paper submitted electronically. I am grateful to Ulises Mejias, Madhavi Menon, Zillah Eisenstein, Jonathan Gil Harris, and Tamina Vahidy for helping me to think through some arguments. However, this remains very much an unfinished work.

² Conference description.

³ Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

⁴ Conference description.

me, then, that to speak meaningfully about the politics of interpretation one needs to address both these issues.

However, even though I have written about the nature of religious authority in Islam or, more accurately, among Muslims, I found it inordinately difficult to frame my thoughts on it in the context of a discussion of text, tradition, and reason. This difficulty had to do with trying to locate authority in the absence of a clearly identifiable power structure—like the church—and the more I endeavored to pin it down, the more it eluded me. After struggling with the issue for while I realized that authority inhabits all three (text, tradition, reason) but that it also vacates each one on occasion, as a way to maintain itself. This is easily demonstrated with respect to so-called “women’s issues.”

For virtually all our history, most Muslims have read the Qur’an as a patriarchal⁵ and, even misogynistic, text. But, as some contemporary scholars have begun to argue that such readings have to do with who has read the Qur’an, how, and in what contexts—in other words, that there is a relationship between knowledge and the means of its production—conservative⁶ Muslims (by whom I mean those who view the Qur’an as inherently patriarchal), barricade themselves behind the bulwark of tradition, moving seamlessly from hermeneutical issues to historical ones. Thus, it is in the name of tradition that they reject new readings of the Qur’an, specially by women, both because such readings unsettle the meanings ascribed to the text by male exegetes and because, in so doing, they pose a threat to men’s traditional roles as interpreters of religious knowledge. In this way, conservatives can dismiss women’s interpretations without even having to read them. Tradition becomes more consequential than the text and, indeed, is used to override it inasmuch as attention is displaced from the Qur’an to traditional gender roles and interpretive practices. (Those who know Muslim interpretive history also know that the use of tradition to trump the sacred text, to put it bluntly, is a very old one dating from the time of al-Shafi.)

But, as soon as one takes issue with this construction of tradition by arguing that tradition also gives us the example of Umm Salama, the wife of the Prophet, who asked why the Qur’an was not addressing women when it was being revealed to him, and of Ayesha, who narrated more hadith (traditions) about the Prophet’s life than anyone else, conservatives take refuge in reason and, more specifically, in “public reason.” Just a few months ago, after I made a presentation at New York University, another panelist, an African-American Muslim, chastised me for talking about my reading of the Qur’an as if it were legitimate. For him, the

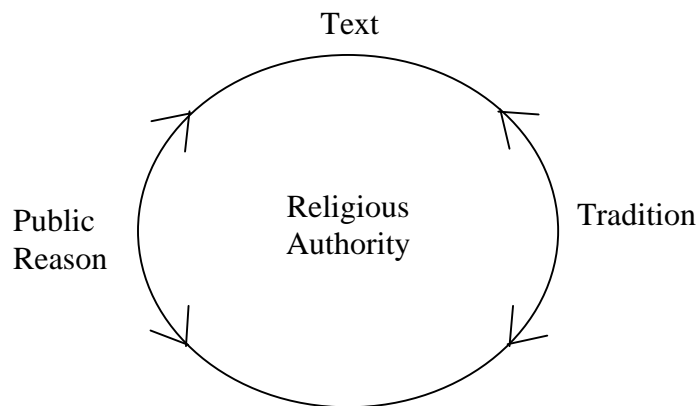
⁵ By patriarchy I mean both a form of father-rule and a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males; thus, by patriarchal I mean legitimizing either form of male privilege.

⁶ Henceforth, simply conservative Muslims.

content of the reading, about which he knew nothing, was irrelevant; what upset him was that as a non-Arabic speaker I had dared to write about the Qur'an. The issue of language is, of course, a crucial one and we could have discussed it, but we could not because of his refusal to engage me and his insistence that the freedom to read the Qur'an in the privacy of my home did not then authorize me to bring my work into the public domain. In his mind, rather tautologically, only a reading that already was part of "public reason"—a concept he did not clarify—had the right to be in the public arena. Nor would he explain why a public reason infused by patriarchal assumptions and founded on the exclusion and marginalization of women is even defensible. (This disciplining took place at a forum on "Religious Authority in Islam" and followed my critique of male interpretive hegemony. However, the irony of this seems to have been lost on most of the attendees only a few of whom spoke with me afterwards.)

In effect, conservatives safeguard dominant readings of the Qur'an (thus sexual discrimination), as well as their own interpretive authority by moving from text, to tradition, to (public) reason without heeding the critiques directed at them and without opening up text, tradition, or reason to critique themselves.

Figure 1: Religious Authority



Troublingly, this chain of elisions operates in exactly the opposite direction as well and with the same results. Thus, if one argues that public reason is socially constructed and reflects existing power relationships in a given society and that it is not always just or ethical or humane (a case in point being public support for slavery in the U.S. for so long), or that women's readings can help to reframe public reason and make it more inclusive, or if one questions whether we even

have a public in the strict sense of the word,⁷ conservatives retreat once more behind tradition, specifically, behind the artifact of an implicit, but eternally binding, public consensus (ijma) dating from the first Islamic centuries, this time arguing that this consensus underwrites the legitimacy of male interpretive authority and their readings of the Qur'an and that it is not right to undo it. Now tradition trumps reason and, once again, conservatives can avoid dealing with women's critiques of religious knowledge or their readings of the Qur'an.

Where they cannot avoid commenting on such readings, conservatives usually discredit them by accusing their authors of not using traditional methodologies. The traditional method, as Brannon Wheeler's (1996) study of the Hanafi legal school shows, involves reading "'backward' through the scholarship of previous generations" (14) and rests on three claims, two of which I find specially troubling. One is that "expertise in the use of interpretive reasoning, more than knowledge of the revelation itself is integral to the definition of practice" (68). The second is "that the authority of the practice defined by later generations [is equivalent to] the authority of revelation" (88). In effect, the traditional method allows interpretive communities to extend "authority from a posited [canonical text]" to themselves instead and to authorize their "own interpretive privilege" (237; 226) while undercutting the Qur'an's primacy.

I have critiqued both these assumptions elsewhere. Here I will only comment on the irony of sanctifying a method as Islamic which erases the distinction Islamic theology has always made between "divine speech and its earthly realization,"⁸ and which re-locates hermeneutic meaning from the Qur'an to its interpretations and thence to the interpreters. In theory, of course, the ability of interpretive communities to define religious meaning seems quite democratic but, in practice—given the undemocratic nature of Muslim societies—it has allowed interpretive communities to normalize patriarchal and misogynistic readings of the Qur'an and to project sexual hatred and partisanship onto the divine itself.

However, when one offers a critique of traditional methodologies or proposes new ones, conservatives take shelter in the text once more, or more precisely in the fixity of the meaning of the text which, they hold, confirms women's inferiority once and for all, making their critiques of the knowledge produced by men irrelevant. (Ironically, the same conservatives have no problem applauding the high status Islam accords to women.) We thus come full circle to where we

⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, for instance, argues that at best what we have today are "partial publics." *Thinking Past Terror*, UK: Verso, 2003: 92.

⁸ Josef van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology," in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Quran as Text*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996, p. 189.

started, albeit this time from the opposite direction. Muslim women are thus caught in this circle of oppression from which it is difficult to escape.

The point of my discussion so far has been to illustrate both the ubiquity of authority and its elisions when it is challenged. At the risk of reifying it, I would argue that it is the very ubiquity of authority that allows it to slip from text to tradition to reason without losing its power to frame the terms of discourse. As such, the tensions between all three have not impeded its ability to re-configure itself continually. In fact, it is the ability of authority to use text, tradition, and reason to trump one another that frees it from (having to deal with) the tensions while also allowing it to safeguard itself from critique.

I would also contend that the ability of authority to locate and re-locate itself, to inhabit and vacate, text and tradition and reason at will—in effect, its continual strategizing—is what makes it inherently political. Thus, the interpretive process is political not only because we always read texts in specific contexts, but also because the very ability of authority to define religious meaning derives from and depends on its ability to make choices that are inexorably political.

Paradoxically, one does not have to accept authority in order to be impacted by it, as my experience at NYU shows. Thus, even as I critique authority, I am never quite free of its reach, specially where it comes to reading the Qur'an.

II. A hermeneutics of liberation

I want to shift focus now and speak about the relationship between text, tradition and reason from a very different perspective: that of a Qur'anic hermeneutics of liberation, and I will use my own work, "Believing Women" in Islam, to do so.

Basically, what I have attempted in this book is to challenge readings of Islam as a religious patriarchy that allegedly puts a "sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience," in the words of noted Muslim feminist, Fatima Mernissi.⁹ In spite of the hegemony of such readings, I argue against them on both historical and hermeneutic grounds, that is, by engaging text, tradition, authority, and reason both as discrete entities and also as a set of overlapping relationships.

Thus, although my subject is the Qur'an "itself," I discuss it first with reference to history, tradition, and the nature of sexual/textual politics in Muslim societies that was conducive to its patriarchal exegesis. One of the points I make in this regard is that Muslim understandings of the text were shaped by how they came to define religious epistemology and methodology and these were, in turn,

⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.

impacted by the complex political relationships that developed between Muslim states and interpretive communities over centuries.

This analysis is meant both to show how deeply the Qur'an is enmeshed in patriarchal modes of reasoning and authority, and to underscore the urgency for a hermeneutics of recuperation that can reframe our understanding of it. That is what I try and do in the second part of my book.

The hermeneutical aspect of my argument seeks to recover the Qur'an's egalitarian and antipatriarchal epistemology in a series of steps. The first is to challenge interpretive reductionism—i.e., the idea that the Qur'an has only one set of patriarchal meanings—by emphasizing the principle of textual polysemy. The second is to argue against interpretive relativism—i.e., the opposite idea that all readings are equally correct and that, therefore a patriarchal reading of the text is as appropriate as an antipatriarchal reading—on the grounds that some readings are in fact neither contextually legitimate nor theologically sound. For instance, readings that project *zulm* (injustice resulting from transgressing against a person's rights) into divine discourse violate the Qur'an's teaching that God never does any *zulm* to people. My third step, then, is to locate the hermeneutic keys for reading the Qur'an in the nature of divine self-disclosure and while this theological move may upset some people, like other believers, I also hold that the purpose of faith is to act as an "aid to understanding [by enabling one to integrate] thinking and believing."¹⁰

The last part of my project consists of rereading the Qur'an itself in light of a clear definition of patriarchy. I argue that if "patriarchy is a continuum at one end of which are misrepresentations of God as Father, and of fathers as rulers over wives and children, and at the other end, the notion of sexual differentiation which is used to privilege males while Otherizing women, then the Qur'an's teachings are antipatriarchal."¹¹ This is because not only does the Qur'an reject the patriarchal imaginary of God as Father, but it also rejects theories of father-right /husband-rule as well as notions of sexual inequality and differentiation. The Qur'an's liberatory promise also lies in its treatment of sexual equality as an ontological fact, its refusal to sexualize moral personality, its promise of multiple paths to God, and its readiness to speak directly to women.

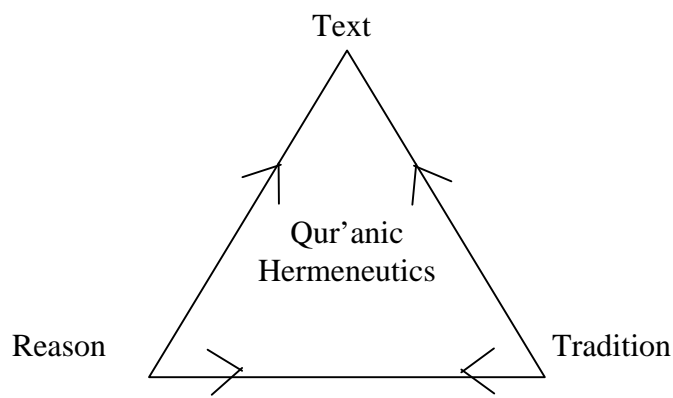
This summary is, of necessity, less nuanced and complex than the original arguments and my point simply is to show that a Qur'anic hermeneutics also engages, but also opens up to critique text, tradition, and reason. Thus, I begin quite unashamedly with the "text" which—for me—is the apex of knowledge

¹⁰ Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994: 51.

¹¹ Barlas, 204.

(hence my preference for a triangle in Figure 2). However, in my mind, there is simply no way to understand the text in isolation from its own double history (of revelation and of reading), or to understand tradition in isolation from the processes of its construction. Tradition, as al-Ghazali argued in the twelfth century, is "a synthetic rather than a 'natural' product, bearing clear signs of selective endorsement."¹² It cannot just pass into the present "unprocessed and unmediated . . . Instead, someone has to make decisions about which aspects of the past are non-essential and thus allowed to drop out, and which elements of the present are consistent with the past and thus eligible for admission into the sanctum of tradition."¹³ That this reasoning was occluded from most people, he maintained, had to do not with the imitativeness of tradition, but with "that blindness that condemns people to being led around by others (taqlid),"¹⁴ from which, claimed al-Ghazali, he was mercifully free.

Figure 2: Qur'anic Hermeneutics



However, to view tradition as historically constructed is not enough for a liberatory hermeneutics; it is also necessary to critique the instrumentalist reason by means of which interpretive authority is exercised in the public sphere in the name of text or tradition. Although I have not attempted to define an "Islamic" reason, I have suggested elsewhere that a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics must begin by questioning notions of patriarchal rationality in terms of which "man" is the sole arbiter of truth and male supremacy is the cornerstone of faith.

¹² Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (Karachi: Oxford University Press) 2002:20.

¹³ Jackson, 24.

¹⁴ Al-Ghazali in *Theological Tolerance*, 88.

Here one might question my right to offer such a reading of the Qur'an as well as its putative authoritativeness. As I note in the postscript of my book, I do not belong to any "interpretive community, nor am I a male, or even a recognized scholar of Islam." However, as a Muslim woman I have a great deal at stake in how Muslims interpret the Qur'an, and in reading it, I remain very much within the tradition that holds that any Muslim may qualify as an interpreter, or mujtahid. A mujtahid is someone who believes

that knowledge (ilm) can originate in revelation and reason, 'observation as well as intuition . . . tradition as well as theoretical speculation' . . . All these forms, however, only acquire equality in 'a single matrix of values' when it is underpinned by a moral imperative rooted in the idea of God's Unity, or Tawhid. A mujtahid is thus, before all else, a believer imbued with a sense of God-consciousness, and a believer's right to interpret religion derives not from social sanctions (permission from clergies or interpretive communities), but from the depths of our own convictions and from the advice the Qur'an gives us to exercise our own intellect and knowledge in reading it.¹⁵

Sustained by this belief, like many other Muslims I have also embarked on a struggle against the sort of religious authority that maintains itself by denying Muslims the right to read our own scripture and, equally importantly, to share those readings with others. Whether or not such readings will ever become part of public reason, or—better yet—whether Muslims will ever problematize and interrogate the very notion of reason as it is exercised—will depend on whether or not Muslim societies will be able to become more open, tolerant, and democratic. After all, hermeneutic and existential questions are ineluctably connected and while one can read liberation out of oppression, one cannot practice liberty in the midst of oppression. That is partly why I find our own discussions about reason and authority so significant given the politically charged and combative moment of war and the fanaticisms of religious and secular extremists. For me, an exercise like ours is meaningful if it can help to reframe not only private understandings, but also public reasoning which has increasingly become hostage to irrationality and war-mongering.

As for me, I struggle to exercise my reason and intellect in the practice of my faith for which, one day, I will be accountable before God. The great Hasidic mystic Rabbi Susya reportedly once said that, on judgment day, "God will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' God will ask 'Why were you not Susya?'"

¹⁵ Barlas, 209-210

Each of us must struggle, then, to know ourselves and to actualize our potential; that is all we have been called upon to do. Beyond that, as the old scholars of Islam always had the wisdom and humility to say, "God knows best."