

“Hold[ing] fast by the best in the precepts:”¹ the Qur’an and method
Conference on The Changeable and Unchangeable
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I am deeply disappointed that health problems have kept me from making the trip to Sarajevo. But, I am grateful that I can still share with you my paper, titled “‘Hold[ing] fast by the best in the precepts:’ the Qur’an and method.”

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To speak of the changeable and unchangeable in Islamic thought or practice is to speak, I believe, of the universal and the particular, since what is unchangeable in religious contexts is generally the universal while what is particular passes away. And to delineate the two, one must consider the relationship between revelation and history, and thus between sacred and secular time.

I will begin, then, by speaking about these relationships but only in passing, both because this is such a brief essay and also because the Qur’an as divine discourse (the unchangeable, or universal) already incorporates within it the reality of the Qur’an as text, by which I mean, following Ricoeur,² a discourse fixed by writing and interpreted by us in time and space (the changeable, or particular).

Thus, even though divine discourse and its interpretations are not the same, the Qur’an unsettles neat binaries between the changeable and unchangeable, the universal and particular, and sacred and secular time, obliging us to rethink the relationships between them in a more complex manner.

Although I will attempt to do that here, it will only be in the context of my argument that the Qur’an itself enables a continually evolving thought and practice as long as we read it in contextually appropriate ways. My real purpose is to suggest such a method for reading it and, in so doing, to demonstrate the centrality of an antipatriarchal Qur’anic hermeneutics to a praxis of liberation.

I. The changeable/unchangeable

As a Muslim, I believe—indeed, must believe—that revelation is unchangeable in the sense that it is enduring and universal.

¹ 7:145; in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an* (New York: Tehrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1988), 383.

² See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145.

But what endures only acquires meaning within some vector of time and not outside it, and even the universal manifests itself in time. Sacred and secular time may not be synchronic, as the Qur'an makes clear, but time is nevertheless an identifiable marker of our relationship to God.³

Thus, revelation occurs in the context of an unfolding human history and it is partly this quality that makes it both universal and particular. It is particular because it addresses us in the immediacy of our lives, and it is universal because it remains relevant to each of those moments in our lives throughout time.

Indeed, one could argue that what makes revelation universal is its timeliness (relevance to history) and not its timelessness (ahistoricity) and, going further, that because it occurs in time, revelation is itself open to historicization.⁴

This principle applies also to the Qur'an inasmuch as one cannot "proceed to the abidingness of the Qur'an, in word and meaning [without proceeding] from its historical ground and circumstance."⁵ In other words, we cannot recontextualize the Qur'an—make it relevant to all historical contexts, hence universal—without first contextualizing, or historicizing, it.

And yet there is a paradoxical tendency among Muslims, which is to recognize the historical contexts of Qur'anic ayat but to dehistoricize the Qur'an because of their conviction that what renders the Qur'an sacred is its ahistoricity rather than its transhistoricity (in part, this belief stems from the mistaken view that historicizing the Qur'an's contexts also means historicizing its contents).⁶

This incoherent position has engendered a lasting problem in Qur'anic exegesis: the tendency to universalize specific Qur'anic injunctions, a practice that has had specially injurious consequences for women, as Amina Wadud⁷ has argued.

Ironically, the same Muslims who deny the relevance of history to (re)reading the Qur'an, also draw on history to defend readings of the Qur'an by the first Muslim community because of its proximity in historical time to the Prophet.

³ There are several Qur'anic references to time and Surah 103, titled Time, begins: "By (the token of) Time (through the Ages)," in Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*; (103:1-2).

⁴ For why Muslims need to historicize the Qur'an, see Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minn.: Bibliotheca Islamica), 1980, and Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002), 58-62.

⁵ Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), 114; his emphasis.

⁶ Of course, as Cragg points out, content and context possess one another in the Qur'an; even so, one can historicize the Qur'an without undermining its universal nature. See Barlas, *ibid.*

⁷ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Thus it is in the name of sacred history that the thought and practice of the first Muslims is declared paradigmatic and unchangeable, and it is temporal distance from this community, and from an arbitrarily closed canon, that defines what is changeable or innovative (b'ida), hence non-normative, in religious thought.

Time is thus used to demarcate the changeable and the unchangeable and the enterprise of history is employed to defend the Qur'an's sacredness, and this simultaneous denial and embrace of historicity is used to argue against change. As I have argued in another context, it is also used to defend a Qur'anic exegesis that dates from medieval times and tends to be patriarchal.

As a Muslim there is a second sense in which I believe—indeed, must believe—that the Qur'an is unchangeable, and this is in the sense that it is unalterable.

But what is unalterable is only so if it cannot be undone. Thus, divine discourse is unalterable because it has already been expressed through a speech act of the Prophet;⁸ it is not unchangeable in the sense that its meanings are fixed or monosemic. No speech act, or text, has only one set of meanings and certainly not a discourse as rich and complex as revelation, as the Qur'an itself affirms.⁹

And, yet, there is another paradoxical tendency among Muslims, which is to admit the inexhaustibility of revelation, but to insist that only one reading of the Qur'an is authentic. And this reading, as I have just noted, has patriarchalized our understanding of Islam by declaring God to be partial to men and to male authority over women.

I have challenged the patriarchal¹⁰ epistemology of such readings elsewhere; here, I will offer only an indirect critique by defining an alternative method to read the Qur'an that does not reduce it to a partisan text.

II. Approaching the Qur'an

This method, which I derive from the Qur'an own hermeneutics, rests on four principles relating to theology, methodology, ethics, and authority.

⁸ To say this is not to say that revelation is the Prophet's speech, however; rather, it remains divine discourse. See Abdullah Saeed, "Rethinking 'Revelation' as a Precondition for Reinterpreting the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* (Vol.1, No. 1, 1999) 93-114.

⁹ See the discussion on page 5 in text, below.

¹⁰ By patriarchy I mean a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males. For a fuller description and why I define it in this way, see Barlas, "Believing Women," chapter 1.

The theological principle states that since our understanding of God's word can not be independent of our understanding of God, we must seek the hermeneutic keys for reading the Qur'an in the nature of divine self-disclosure.¹¹

The three aspects of God's self-disclosure that I have explored in my own work are God's Unity (Tawhid), Justice (defined negatively as not doing *zulm* to anyone by transgressing against their rights),¹² and, Unrepresentability. Each of these principles, I have argued, militates against a patriarchalized view of God as well as theories of male privilege that suggest affinities between Islam and patriarchy.

The doctrine of Tawhid maintains that God's rule brooks no intermediaries, much less other rulers. Inasmuch as men set themselves up as intermediaries, rulers, or guardians over women, I believe they also violate an essential tenet of Tawhid.

Similarly, the exclusion of *zulm* from divine self-definition serves as an argument against patriarchies which habitually transgress against women's rights thus doing *zulm* to them. As such, we can only project patriarchy into the Qur'an at the cost of ascribing *zulm* to God.

The Qur'an's prohibition against representing God, on the other hand, undercuts the homo-social heresy that a masculinized God has a special affinity with men.

This is, of course, a simplified version of my argument, and my point is merely to show that basing our reading of the Qur'an in a theologically sound view of God opens up infinite, and infinitely liberatory, ways of encountering scripture.

A second component of an antipatriarchal hermeneutics is a methodological one that derives from the Qur'anic injunctions to privilege its foundational *ayat* over the allegorical and to read it as a whole. The emphasis on holism is crucial given the severity of the Qur'an warning against dividing it into "arbitrary parts" or making it "into shreds,"¹³ that is, reading it selectively or piecemeal.

Read as a whole and with attention to its foundational *ayat*, the Qur'an provides no basis for claiming that men are ontologically superior to women, even if by a single degree, or are guardians over women, or can beat disobedient wives, or marry at will, contrary to popular readings of the so-called misogynistic verses that hinge on forcing single meanings onto single words or phrases.¹⁴

¹¹ Such a position assumes, of course, that there is authorial intent discourse.

¹² This is Toshihiko Izutsu's understanding of the term. *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Qur'an* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959), 152.

¹³ 15: 89-93; in Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*.

¹⁴ See Barlas, "Believing Women," for a full exposition.

The third component of this method is an ethical one and it derives from two Qur'anic verses: one in which God instructs Moses to "enjoin Thy people to hold fast By the best in the precepts" (7:145);¹⁵ and another which says that "Those who listen To the Word And follow the best (meaning) in it . . . are the ones Whom God has guided, and . . . endued With understanding" (39:18).¹⁶

The Qur'an itself, then, establishes that not all its readings may be appropriate and it places on us the moral responsibility of judging between their contextual legitimacy by selecting only the best, which it leaves to us to define.

In addition to demonstrating that revelation is inherently polysemic, the concept of "the best" also suggests the need for continual reinterpretation given that our ideas of what is the best are historically contingent, hence liable to change.

Emphasizing the best also shows that hermeneutic and existential questions are connected since, to be able to choose between readings, one must minimally have the freedom to engage in open and rational debate which is impossible in anti-democratic and repressive societies and communities.

The last aspect of the hermeneutics I am describing impinges on the notion of authority, specifically on who is authorized to interpret scripture. Historically, of course, only male scholars and socially sanctioned interpretive communities have interpreted the Qur'an. However, the text itself calls on each one of us to use our own intellect and reasoning, *aql* and *ilm*, to decipher its *ayat*.

Significantly, in the Qur'an, *aql* and *ilm* are not a function of literacy, much less of scholarship and, indeed, it is unambiguous in stating that it came also for the unlettered *bedouin* in the desert (another sense in which it is universal).

In effect, the authority to interpret the Qur'an derives from the Qur'an itself, not from public sanction or reason or existing structures of interpretive authority among Muslims. In fact, the structure of Muslim authority and public reason have effectively closed off the Qur'an to fully half the *ummah*, the women.

The irony of this only emerges when one recalls the tradition that the Qur'an became the only scripture to address women after Umm Salama dared to ask why it was not addressing them as it was still being revealed to the Prophet.

And, the unchangeable changed to embrace the concerns of a woman!

¹⁵ In Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*, 383.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1241.

I have always viewed this as a teaching moment in a divine pedagogy¹⁷ that, by opening up the space for Umm Salama's question—I assume God gave her the grace to ask it—meant to provide a lasting lesson to the ummah. Indeed, it offers several lessons, some of which I have drawn out elsewhere.¹⁸ To these I will add some new ones here, by way of a conclusion.

Unending Lessons

The lessons I want to stress are pertinent to the issues I have discussed in this essay, which began as an engagement with philosophical issues and seems to be ending as a homily.

For one thing, the timeliness of Umm Salama's question renders it timeless since her particular concern, why the Qur'an was not addressing women, has become a universal one for Muslim women today as the Qur'an appears to remain silent on many issues of pressing concern to us.

I believe this is because throughout our history women have been kept from asking questions of it, much less interrogating it, in the spirit of Umm Salama. Instead, a self-styled class of male intermediaries has inserted itself between the Qur'an and women, buttressed by public reason and communal authority.

However, as Umm Salama's example shows, if women do not directly engage the scripture, they also cannot expect it to be responsive to our needs.

Second, God's responsiveness to her confirms that questioning the scripture as a woman is a divinely-sanctioned right. I make this point because the same ummah that venerates Umm Salama also denigrates women's readings of the Qur'an on the pretext that they are a Western-grafted form of feminism onto Islam that incite gender warfare.

But, the first woman to interrogate the Qur'an was neither interested in a gender war and nor was she a Westerner or a feminist. Nor, indeed, was she a scholar, but the Prophet did not therefore silence her on that account.

To me, the lessons are clear: men cannot claim the Qur'an as their own because the Qur'an has been opened to women for all times and only women can answer for their understanding of it on the Day of Deen. Nor can only scholars have the right to interpret the Qur'an because it came also for the unschooled. Nor indeed

¹⁷ I am grateful to Ulises Ali Mejias for this insight and wording.

¹⁸ See Asma Barlas, "Women's and Feminist Readings of the Qur'an," in Jane McAuliffe (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), forthcoming.

can public reason become the sole basis for defining Islam because public reason has proven to be misogynistic, patriarchal, and resistant to change.

Rather, each believer must struggle to understand scripture themselves by means of whatever grace has been given them by God; this is their vocation as Muslims.

These are also the lessons that I believe should guide our explorations of the changeable and unchangeable if we are not to end up tilting at windmills.

The Qur'an tells us that everything will perish but the face of God. Hence that is the only unchangeable in Islamic thought and practice; all else is changeable and will pass, whether we will it to or not. This certainty should liberate us from a fear of freedom¹⁹ and allow us to embrace a universe of unthought possibilities.

¹⁹ I borrow this phrase from Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 2000).