

Globalizing Equality: Muslim Women, Theology, and Feminisms

Talk at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., March 26, 2004

Asma Barlas

I feel very privileged to be part of this series and I would like to thank Fera Simone, Mary Jane Deeb, and Meena Sharify-Funk for inviting me to participate in it. Part of my charge was to write a paper that is at least 20 pages long and then to present a 20 minute talk on it. The paper has turned out to be longer and since I have a lot to cover, I will dispense with the exculpatory caveats and get right down to it.

Essentially, I do three things in the paper: since the series makes some very specific claims about the role of technology in enabling political and social change, I begin by critiquing these claims as a way partly of providing a context for my larger argument. This is to define a Qur'anic hermeneutics of sexual equality that I believe should be at the heart of democratic reform in Muslim societies. Lastly, I join the discussion on why "theology matters"¹ as a way of reflecting on the debates on Muslim women and social change and why I believe these debates are inappropriately framed.

My basic claim is that the technologies of global communication will only be able to transform Muslim women's (and men's) lives in meaningful ways if they go together with—and better yet, if they can help to bring about—a fundamental epistemic shift in how Muslims interpret and practice Islam. Such a shift would involve a willingness to read liberation from the same scripture that Muslims use to discriminate against women.

¹ Khalid Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002: 104.

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I. Muslim women, information technologies, and democracy

The reason I begin by querying the linkages this series makes between information technologies, Muslim women, and democracy/ human rights is because I think they need to be theorized more discriminatingly. For instance, the description for this series says that a “quiet revolution” is occurring in the lives of Muslim women who are “assessing leadership roles in some of the most future-oriented sectors of society. Information technology, satellite TV, business administration, public health, and higher education are attracting their talents. This transformation of roles will have an impact on the future of democratization and development of vibrant, inclusive civil societies that could push forward gender equality and fundamental human rights.” Indeed, the narrative goes on to state that women already are “recreating the public sphere as a domain of equality and inclusion” through “textual and contextual activism.” The description also points out that new information technologies “have connected the world instantaneously for the first time in human history. Through Internet the nature of political participation has shifted; individuals have a larger role than casting a vote. The satellite TV and Internet offer journey[s] without visa[s] or borders and provide opportunity for dialogue and a right to travel and observe other cultures.” Against this backdrop participants have been asked to address several questions including assessing the strategies women are using to contest “culturally androcentric institutions.”

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As a Muslim woman who is involved in a form of “textual activism,” I welcome this dialogue and contribute to it by sharing one strategy for challenging patriarchal epistemologies and institutions. I should also indicate which parts of the description I agree with. I agree that the rapid pace of technological change is impacting people’s lives in profound ways; that activists are using the internet to forge real solidarities and that, depending on where they live, more women are taking up careers that once were considered off-limits to them and by them. Women in many societies also are creatively reappropriating religious texts and working to broaden the political arena. I would only contend that these are universal occurrences that are unfolding in different societies in different ways, including in Muslim societies.

However, I am rather more skeptical about the claim that high-tech jobs for Muslim women will impact their social roles in such a way and to such an extent as to generate democratic societies that will “push forward gender equality and fundamental human rights.” This certainly was the developmental trajectory of “the West,” but a domino theory of progress in which the West “works as a silent referent in historical knowledge”² is not very helpful for understanding postcolonial societies, as the spectacular failure of modernization theory attests. Consequently, rather than trying to universalize a Western teleology, we should work with models that can accommodate the specificities of Muslim societies and I would assume that some variants of postcolonial theory offer such models. I

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should also note that it is difficult to find many Muslim societies where women are transforming “the public sphere as a domain of equality and inclusion” though, of course, not for lack of trying, specially in Iran. But when I think of the country of my origin, Pakistan, I am less sanguine that women’s struggles there are having, or will have, the same impact as in Iran.

Moreover, while I agree that we live in a technologically interconnected world, such a statement doesn’t really say anything about the nature of the technology, the connections it has enabled, or of the world as we perceive it. About 99% of people will probably never have access to such technologies as computers and thus to the rosy new worlds of borderless travel and participatory politics that the internet is credited with opening up. And, for the one percent that does have access, what precisely does it mean to travel though the internet to observe others? Someone who has lived in, say, Turkey (as my son has) will tell you right away that one cannot recognize “Turkey” from (what passes as) Turkish culture on the internet. Also, while the internet does allow journeys without visas, this does not mean that technology has done away with borders; it has simply made the act of crossing them invisible; in fact, technologies are always in the process of re-placing and re-creating borders.

I think it is also important not to treat the internet itself as the signifier of a democratic global public arena which happens when we assume that technology = borderlessness = participatory/ democratic politics. Such a model assumes a

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*,

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public which, frankly, does not exist even within “Western” democracies and certainly not at a global level. In fact, theorists like Susan Buck-Morss worry that “We the multitude who might become that public, cannot yet reach each other across the excluding boundaries of language, beneath the power distortions of global media, against the muffling exclusions of poverty and the disparities in information.” At best, we can be “members of partial publics.”³ The absence of a global public also limits the democratic promise of the internet, even if, as Ulises Mejias points out, “Every ethnicity, ideology, religion and fetish known to humankind is probably represented in cyberspace.”⁴ Variety and pluralism do not necessarily signify democracy or even tolerance, and, as Herbert Marcuse unsettlingly argued, even tolerance can be repressive so long as the dominant perspective continues to structure people’s encounter with difference thereby marginalizing and positioning alternative discourses as “the exotic other.”⁵

Having said all this, I do want to recognize the promise of information technologies for Muslims. Peter Mandaville (who I didn’t know would be in the audience today) argues that the Internet offers diaspora Muslims in the West “a forum for the conduct of politics *within* Islam”⁶ that bypasses “traditional gatekeepers and adjudicators of interpretive rights, procedures and adequacy.”⁷

Princeton University Press, 2000: 28.

³ Susan Buck Morss. *Thinking Past Terror*, Verso, 2003: 92.

⁴ Uli Ali Mejias, “Virtual Freedom and Tolerance: The Perils of Uniform Diversity,” Blog: <http://ideant.typepad.com/ideant/> February 8, 2004.

⁵ Stephen Brookfield, “Reassessing Subjectivity, Criticality, and Inclusivity: Marcuse’s Challenge to Adult Education,” *Adult Education Quarterly*, Aug. 2002, 52: 4, 265-280; p. 276

⁶ Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2004: 168.

⁷ Jon Anderson quoted in Mandaville, p. 168.

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Thus, “in the absence of sanctioned information from recognised institutions, Muslims are increasingly taking religion into their own hands.”⁸ In the process, they are also creating “a new form of imagined community, or a re-imagined umma.” By allowing Muslims to take Islam into their own hands, as Mandaville argues, the Internet is also allowing the rise of “a new breed” of Muslim intellectuals for whom “neither the transmission of knowledge nor the place of this transmission is institutionalised. Everyone is ‘authorised.’”⁹ This is the aspect of information technologies that I am most interested in because of its promise to open up Islam to liberatory readings. Thus, like Mejias, I believe that there is indeed “a productive space for technology and virtuality within praxis.”¹⁰

Like many other Muslims, I am interested in trying to figure out what the content of this praxis might be for Muslims, specially women. I do not assume that human rights, equality, and democracy will flow from the global economy (in truth this economy is creating mostly low-end and badly paid jobs held mostly by young girls). Nor do I feel that the sole political referents for Muslims should be a vaguely defined “West.” Instead, I believe that we must create “normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities.”¹¹ As a believer, I look to Islam to provide such horizons and I contend that one such horizon is a Qur’anic hermeneutics of sexual equality.

⁸ Mandaville, p. 168.

⁹ Roy quoted in Mandaville, p. 176.

¹⁰ Mejias, “Postmodernism, Virtuality, Globalization, and the (fragmented) Self,” Blog: <http://ideant.typepad.com/ideant/>, December 21, 2003.

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II. A Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Equality

Before I describe such a hermeneutics I want to say why I consider it relevant to a discussion of Muslim women's lives and to social change in Muslim societies. As a Muslim woman who was born and raised in the world's second largest Muslim country and who lived in it for most of my life, I know the hazards of ascribing the plight of Muslim women straight-forwardly to "Islam." For one thing, many of the social and cultural practices of Muslim societies have little or nothing to do with Islam, specially as embodied in the teachings of the Qur'an (the persistence of "honor" killings in Pakistan illustrates this as graphically as does the absence of wide-spread resistance to this revolting custom). In fact, it is unlikely that most Muslims even know the Qur'an's teachings given that the vast majority is illiterate and cannot read. For another thing, women in Muslim societies lead dramatically different lives depending on such factors as their social class which determines the opportunities they will or will not have throughout their lives. As such, it is difficult to generalize about women's experiences even within a single state, much less in all Muslim societies. Even so, Muslims everywhere tend to view men as being ontologically superior to women and to believe that a woman is duty-bound to submit to the man in his capacity as her "husband, father or brother."¹² This ideology of male supremacy infuses Muslim cultures and consciousness to such an extent that it has given rise to representations of Islam as a religious patriarchy that "professes models of

¹¹ Chakrabarty, p. 20.

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hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience.”¹³ Men who cannot read the Qur’an and who do not live in accordance with its teachings will nonetheless throw about three or four words or parts of sentences from it to justify the mistreatment of women, ranging from outright abuse to forms of divorce and polygyny that distort and pervert the Qur’an’s injunctions. I want to be clear: I am not accusing all Muslim men of being oppressive or misogynistic; this is too much of a Western caricature to be true. What I consider to be more significant than the actual numbers of men who engage in such practices is the fact that there is religious sanction for them to do so if they are thus inclined. Since this is true of almost all Muslim societies irrespective of other differences between them, I feel that a reading of the Qur’an that challenges oppressive interpretations and demonstrates the egalitarian nature of the Qur’an’s teachings can help to challenge sexual discrimination among Muslims. That is the conviction that led me to write *“Believing Women” in Islam*.¹⁴

Essentially, I do two things in the book. Part of my objective is to illustrate Leila Ahmed’s claim that different readings of the same texts yield “fundamentally different Islams” for women,¹⁵ and I do this by showing that what Muslims read the Qur’an to be saying is a function of who reads it, how, and in what contexts. That

¹² Maududi in Mazhar ul Haq Khan. *Purdah and Polygamy*. New Delhi, India: Harman Publications, 1983: 61-62.

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

¹⁴ Asma Barlas, *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002.

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is, I make visible the relationships between knowledge and the means of its production, specifically, between authority and knowledge as well as between method, meaning, and gender (though I do not posit a fixed relationship between gender and reading). Demonstrating the interconnectedness of hermeneutical and existential questions allows me to argue for a restructuring not only of Muslim religious knowledge, but also of Muslim societies on the grounds that we do not produce knowledge in a vacuum.

The second part of my work involves reading the Qur'an and I do this by means of hermeneutical principles that I derive from the Qur'an. The first is to read the Qur'an in light of a sound theological understanding of God since for Muslims the Qur'an is God's speech and we cannot understand it independently of how we visualize God's self-disclosure. (Indeed, I consider God's self-disclosure to be at the heart of Qur'anic epistemology, as I term it.) As a way to exemplify this approach, I draw upon three aspects of God's self-disclosure to read the Qur'an. The first is the doctrine of *Tawhid*, or divine unity, that maintains that God is One and that God's Sovereignty is indivisible. I argue that theories of male rule and privilege that set up men as sovereign over women or intermediaries between God and women encourage male worship thereby undercutting divine sovereignty, thus committing a heresy, or *shirk*. We must therefore avoid reading such theories into the Qur'an. A second attribute of God is that God is Just and never does any *zulm* to human beings, the primary

¹⁵ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale

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meaning of *zulm* in the Qur'an being to transgress against another's rights.¹⁶ As such, I argue that we should not read *zulm* into the Qur'an either. Since patriarchies do transgress against women's rights by oppressing them, they commit *zulm* and we should therefore not read the Qur'an as sanctioning patriarchy since doing so ascribes *zulm* to God. A third aspect of divine self-disclosure is that God is unrepresentable and unlike anything created; I take this to mean that references to God as "He" are bad linguistic conventions and not accurate statements about divine reality or indicative of the idea that God, being male, is partial to males. (This is, of course a more complex argument than I am able to convey here.)

A second principle is to read the Qur'an for its best meanings as the Qur'an itself asks us to do. This injunction conclusively establishes that while we can derive different meanings from the Qur'an, not all the meanings will be equally legitimate and in fact the Qur'an provides some criteria for judging between the contextual legitimacy of different readings, for instance, by asking us to read it as a whole rather than piecemeal or in a decontextualized way, and to privilege its clear verses over its allegorical.

Finally, since part of my objective is to read the Qur'an's position on patriarchy, I apply two definitions of patriarchy to read it that encompasses both its historical/ religious and modern/ secular forms. Historically, patriarchy was a form of rule by the father that derived its legitimacy from re-presenting God as

University Press, 1992.

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Father and the father/ husband as sovereign over wives and children. That is, it drew parallels between God's sovereignty over men and men's sovereignty over women. I apply this definition to read the Qur'an because the Qur'an was revealed to a traditional patriarchy (much like Taliban-ruled Afghanistan) and my aim is to see if it endorses this mode of male rule or authority by representing God as Father/ male or by teaching that God has a special relationship with men or that rule by the father/ husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's rule. Additionally, I want to see if the Qur'an teaches that men embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful, as religious patriarchies claim.

However, since male authority has been reconfigured in more modern and secular forms I also define patriarchy as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by "transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other.'"¹⁷ I apply this definition to read the Qur'an because Muslims hold its teachings to be universal and my aim is to see if it endorses modern forms of male privilege by advocating gender dualisms, differentiations, or inequalities on the basis of biological sex. Specifically, I examine whether the Qur'an privileges men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treats man as the Self

¹⁶ See Izutsu, Toshihiko. *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*. Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964.

¹⁷ Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1984: 90. In her later work, Eisenstein recognizes that differences don't mean inequality.

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and woman as the Other, or views women and men as opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual inequality do.

Based on a careful reading of the Qur'an's position on a wide range of issues, including the nature of divine ontology, human creation and moral individuality, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, marriage and divorce, and sex and gender, I conclude that the Qur'an does not in fact endorse either form of patriarchy.

To begin with, it does not represent God as Father/ male and in fact forbids sacralizing God as Father. Nor does it valorize fathers or fatherhood in the manner of traditional and religious patriarchies. In fact, the Qur'an suggests that there is a natural conflict between monotheism and patriarchy inasmuch as the former is based on God's sovereignty and the latter on man's. However, the Qur'an does recognize the historical existence of patriarchies as well as the fact that, in actually existing patriarchies, men are the locus of authority which may be why it addresses men so frequently. To address men however is not tantamount to advocating patriarchy and the Qur'an repeatedly warns against "following the ways of the father," which can be read literally or metaphorically.

I also show that the so-called misogynistic verses—dealing with "wife-beating," divorce, and polygyny—can be read in different ways and that even if we are not happy with some of the Qur'an's provisions today, none of the verses establish men as being ontologically superior to women or entitled to their submission. To the contrary, the Qur'an teaches that God created women and

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men from a single self (*nafs*), designated them as each other's friends and guides (*awliya*), and put love and mercy (*sukun*) between their hearts. In no context does the Qur'an say that men have attributes or faculties that women do not; indeed it does not even describe men and women in terms of masculine or feminine traits because it does not associate sex with gender. Thus, while the Qur'an recognizes biological differences, it does not assign them any gender symbolism. Not a single verse suggests that women's and men's gender roles are a function of their biology or that biological differences make the two unequal or one subordinate to the other. Since sex/ gender is not a meaningful determinant of moral personality *in* the Qur'an, I believe that we also cannot ascribe sexual inequality *to* the Qur'an. On this basis, I argue that the Qur'an also does not support modern forms of patriarchy.

In arriving at this reading, I do not ignore the fact that the Qur'an treats women and men differently with respect to some issues but while Muslims interpret this as a sign of inequality, the Qur'an itself does not tie its different treatment to the claim that men and women are unequal or opposites, or that women are like lesser or defective men or that the sexes are incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal. Moreover, difference does not always signify inequality as many feminists themselves now argue who initially theorized women's liberation in terms of the identical treatment of women and men.

Although I do not attempt to offer a theory of sexual equality based on my reading of the Qur'an, I do offer elements of a Qur'anic framework for deriving

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such a theory realizing how difficult it is, especially for Muslim women, to undertake such a venture in most Muslim societies today. Regrettably, as Khalid Abou El Fadl argues, at times interpretive communities “hold the moral insights of the text [by which he means the Qur’an] hostage. [They can] stultify and imprison the text in an extremist paradigm that becomes very difficult to disentangle or dismantle and as a result makes it very difficult to restore the text’s integrity.”¹⁸ Yet, in order to be able to contest “culturally androcentric” and patriarchal institutions in Muslim societies, we have to try and retrieve the Qur’an’s integrity by de-linking God from sexual oppression. Such an endeavor is the first step in evolving an egalitarian sexual praxis that will also allow Muslim women (and men) to experience the divine as a liberating force in their lives. So long as men continue to oppress women in God’s name, neither can hope to encounter God as full human beings inasmuch as the dialectic of oppression reduces the humanity of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

III. Theology, Secularism, and Feminisms

I come now, to the last part of my paper. As you may have noticed, so far I have argued against a simplistic view of information technology as the agent of democracy in Muslim societies while also identifying the opportunities that the Internet, for example, is making available to Muslims to engage Islam. Additionally, I have tried to illustrate the liberatory (hence democratic) potential of theology for women by opening up the Qur’an to a reading that challenges its

¹⁸ El Fadl, p. 105.

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appropriation by religious patriarchies. Although I have not linked these two arguments systematically, I also have not positioned technology against theology in the manner of much of the literature on women and social change in Muslim societies. In fact, this literature has become so polarized around false binaries—theology vs. social issues, Islam vs. democracy, the Qur'an vs. universal standards—that it keeps us from theorizing the political possibilities and “practical options . . . opened up or closed by the notion that the world has *no* significant binary features, that it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states,” as Talal Asad argues.¹⁹ By way of a conclusion, therefore, I want to consider the options that we close down by framing the debate on social change in Muslim societies in terms of binaries, specially theology vs. secularism. This will also allow me to link Muslim with global politics, albeit only illustratively.

In the wake of 9/11, an instructive exchange took place on whether theology matters between el Fadl and Tariq Ali. While el Fadl's inclination was to try and delink 9/11 from Islam by defending the Qur'anic provisions on tolerance, his critics pointed to the injurious impact of U.S. foreign policies and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a way to reframe 9/11 as more than just a problem of Muslim intolerance and extremism. It is in this context that Ali argues that theology is “useless” for resolving the “real problems” of Muslims who, he says, need to “move beyond discussing whether or not the Qur'an promotes tolerance

¹⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University

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and grapple with the urgent social and political problems that affect [them] today.”²⁰ El Fadl replies that for millions of believers God is a “part of their moral and material universe. This is why theology matters. If theology does not matter, then they do not matter, and, ultimately I do not matter either. It would seem to me to be both unwise and immoral to imply that the perspectives of people whose theology is inseparable from their very existence simply do not matter.” Moreover, at a practical political level, it is only by engaging theology that Muslims can deny fanatical “groups their Islamic banner and . . . challenge their claim to authenticity.”²¹

In many ways, this exchange is symptomatic of the debate on Muslim women’s rights as well. On the one hand are people, like myself, who believe that, by providing an internal critique of Islam, a liberatory theology can challenge and reform oppressive Muslim practices against women. This does not mean, however, that all of us pin the entire project of sexual equality and women’s rights on theology alone. On the other hand are those, mostly Marxists and secular feminists, who believe that “so long as [Islamic feminists] remain focused on theological arguments rather than socio-economic and political questions, and so long as their point of reference is the Quran rather than universal standards, their impact will be limited at best.”²² This is Val Moghadam’s conclusion in her essay, “Islamic Feminism and its Discontents,” in which she reviews the controversies

Press, 2003: 15

²⁰ Tariq Ali, “Theological Distractions,” in el Fadl, p. 41.

²¹ Fadl, p. 104-105.

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(mainly within the expatriate Iranian community) on the Islamic regime in Iran and women's rights. Given this conviction, she cautions Muslim women against trying to reform Islam from within an Islamic framework because it is "difficult to win theological arguments"²³ and because attempts to do so can "reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic system, help to reproduce it, and undermine secular alternatives."²⁴

To understand and even sympathize with Moghadam's suspicion of Islam given the experiences of women in contemporary Iran and other Muslim states, to say nothing of the history of sexual discrimination in Muslim societies, is not, however, to agree with all her premises. First, in the vein of "modern European political" thinkers, Moghadam (and other Marxists) can only accommodate religious beliefs as "practices of so-called 'superstition.'" According to Dipesh Chakrabarty this is because they view "the human [as] ontologically singular" and "gods and spirits . . . [as] 'social facts,' [as if] the social somehow exists prior to them." However, not only need we not assume "a logical priority of the social," but it is also difficult to find a society "in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them." Indeed, on some accounts, "Being human means . . . discovering 'the possibility of calling upon God [or gods] without being under an obligation to first establish his [or their] reality.'"²⁵

²² Val Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents," http://www.iran-bulletin.org/islamic_feminism.htm, p. 12

²³ Moghadam, p. 13.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁵ Chakrabarty, p. 16.

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Second, and perhaps more to the point, I am not sure how feasible it is to draw neat lines between people's belief systems and their social and political conditions. In fact Marxists themselves point out that all systems of thought (ideology, philosophy, religious knowledge, common-sense) exist in symbiosis with economic and political structures and are entirely dissociable from them. But since many Marxists also adhere to a unidirectional theory of change, from the economy to politics and ideology, they regard the latter as merely epiphenomenal. However, such determinism is itself problematic as internal critiques of Marxism reveal since at least Antonio Gramsci.²⁶ Moreover, even if religion or theology do not impinge directly on socio-economic and political questions (though classics of European thought like Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* would suggest otherwise), they can affect people's attitudes towards social and economic issues and, more importantly, towards women thus impacting women's life chances as well. Conversely, political and economic change may not always be able to secure women's interests in societies in which they count for intrinsically less than men. While many nonMuslims also assign women a secondary status, to the extent that Muslims justify doing this in the name of Islam a progressive theology may well be a powerful corrective to their beliefs.

Even more importantly, framing the problems of Muslim societies in terms of socio-political issues vs. theology ignores that not all theological or

²⁶ For an analysis of Gramsci's position on ideology, see Asma Barlas, *Democracy, Nationalism,*

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hermeneutic projects undercut attempts to secure civil liberties or representative governments. To the contrary, they can provide an incentive for change by showing that discrimination is not intrinsic to the practice of Islam and in fact subverts the Qur'an's egalitarianism. However, we close down this option in Muslim societies when we accept patriarchal readings of the Qur'an as its only possible readings and, on this basis, position Islam against democracy and the Qur'an against "universal standards." This oppositional framing of Islam and democracy, which is supposed to edge Muslims towards democracy, ensures that democracy is never presented as being compatible with Islam. Telling Muslims that the cost of joining the "universal community" is to abandon any sense of themselves as a specifically Muslim *umma* can only evoke in them suspicion of this community, not veneration for it.

Problematically, the same people who put the onus on Muslims of defending the relevance of our religion and our scripture to ourselves, feel no need to defend the secular alternatives they champion since secularism already enjoys a certain currency. Robert Young, for instance, argues that all critical theory is "distinguished by an unmediated secularism, opposed to and consistently excluding the religions that have taken on the political identity of providing alternative value-systems to those of the west—broadly speaking, Islam and Hinduism." As an example, he points to the failure of postcolonial studies to consider Gandhi's spirituality "a form of anti-western political and

and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

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cultural critique.” In fact, on Young’s views, “Gandhi’s anomalous position brings out the extent to which, as a result of its Marxist orientation, an absolute division between the material and the spiritual operates within postcolonial studies. . . . Postcolonial theory, despite its espousal of subaltern resistance, scarcely values subaltern resistance that does not operate according to its own secular terms.”²⁷

This unmediated secularism obscures the epistemic violence of secularism in its garb of “universalizing reason,”²⁸ and also keeps Marxists like Moghadam and Ali from realizing some simple truths about Muslims. One is that regardless of how well or whether Muslims read the Qur’an (and I said earlier that the majority does not), the Qur’an nonetheless abides in our consciousness so enduringly that we are unlikely to toss it aside in the name of socio-political values or “universal standards.”

What also concerns me the options that are closed down at a global level by refusing to acknowledge the value of internal critiques of Islam in reforming Muslim practices. Of course, to recognize the efficacy of such critiques one would need to recognize the power of Islam and, to recognize the power of Islam, one would need to engage it on its own terms, that is, without attempting to secularize it or make it over in the Western image of a completely privatized religion. But this would mean legitimizing Islamic discourses, if not Islam itself, in the global arena. This most secular theorists are loath to do preferring, instead, to silence “Islam as a political discourse, by reducing it to a religious practice . . .

²⁷ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2001:

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in effect closing off public discussion of how the many varieties of Islamism are challenging and extending the discursive field of political resistance.” However, argues Buck-Morss, “Such a discussion . . . is there to be engaged within the *global* public sphere, as opposed to our own provincial one, and there is urgency to do so.”²⁹ This critique from the Left shows that secular commitments need not keep one from recognizing that what deserves respect is “the intellectually critical and socially accountable power of Islamism . . . not its instrumentalized uses by groups in power to garner unquestioning support and to silence internal opposition.”³⁰ The social power of “Islamism,” as Buck-Morss astutely realizes, lies in its function as an internal critique of Islam, something she is able to recognize because she is also willing to see the problems with Western hegemonizing projects. As she points out, if “Western-defined freedom brings with it submission to Western power, the purported goal is undermined by the self-alienating means.”³¹

To me, the most compelling aspect of Buck-Morss’ argument is not so much its intelligent and audacious defense of political Islam; rather, it is the fact that her “gesture” towards “Islamism” hints at the possibilities latent in “the West” to renew itself by engaging “Islamism” on its own terms. Indeed, in her hands “Islamism” becomes a critical criterion against which “the West” also can measure its own practices and, in so doing, open itself to a constructive self-

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²⁸ Asad, p. 59.

²⁹ Buck-Morss, p. 42.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 46.

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critique. The only choice before Western secular and critical theorists, then, is not an unmediated secularism, or complicity in “the West’s” hegemonizing projects; they can also strive to articulate “a critical discourse adequate to the demands of a global public sphere, in which the hegemony of the colonizing discourses has been shaken.”³²

Like many other people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, I also believe that so long as colonizing U.S. discourses remain in tact, the global arena also will not be conducive to equality and democracy. This is partly what I mean to convey by the title of this essay, “Globalizing Equality.” To put it directly, we (the “partial publics” of Buck-Morss) cannot speak with a clear conscience about sexual equality in Muslim societies without speaking about equality in the global arena. The language of rights needs to be employed not only to ensure women equal rights in Muslim societies but also to ensure Muslim societies equal rights in an emergent global public sphere in which we can not only “think past” U.S. hegemony but, some day, actually move beyond it.

Partly, however, by “Globalizing Equality” I mean to refer to the need to ensure equality for Muslim women where ever they live. To my mind such a project hinges partly or largely on the ability of Muslims to evolve an egalitarian praxis that is based on the Qur’an’s teachings, specifically, on “a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an and seeks *the practice* of rights and justice for *all* human beings

³¹ Buck-Morss, p. 46.

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in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.”³³ This is how Margot Badran defines “Islamic feminism,” based, she says, on her reading of my work as well as Amina Wadud’s. For her, even being able to “speak of gender equality” means being able to transcend “private and public . . . east or west [since] we are speaking [the] world.” For Badran, “Islamic feminism” not only “breaks down the east-west binary it also dissolves the historically created religious-secular polarity. Islam (as religion and culture) is both *din wa dunya*, ‘religion and the world.’ . . . The aggressive constructing and labeling of Muslims ‘secularists’ and ‘religious’ in our day has been politically motivated and deployed. I say ‘in our day’ because this intense polarity is *created* in time and place—in the context of identity politics (another form of cross-demonizing).” Moreover, as she points out, inasmuch as “gender equality and social justice are embedded in the Qur’an we are not speaking of these principles as products of ‘modernity’ understood as *western* modernity. People worldwide come to concepts of gender equality and social justice through different routes, through different texts—religious or secular.” For Muslims, “Ideas of gender equality and social justice were introduced in early 7th century C.E. Arabia through the words that became enshrined in the Qur’an.” While, for this reason, I prefer to label the sort of perspective Badran has defined as simply Qur’anic and to call myself a “believer” rather than a feminist—and therein hangs a tale!—I also believe that for Muslim theology to matter, it needs to incorporate the discourse of gender

³² *ibid.*, p. 101.

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equality that Badran defines as “Islamic feminism.” This will allow those of us who wish to keep the “company . . . of God”³⁴ to do so while also fulfilling our mandate as socially accountable agents on earth. It is this aspiration that has encouraged me to join my voice to those of other Muslims who want to interpret Islam “in the light of moral humanistic commitments”³⁵ and to those of non-Muslims who want to ensure that Islamic discourses are not “excluded from the global discussion because [their] premises are non-Western.”³⁶

³³ Margot Badran, “Islamic Feminism: Beyond Good and Evil, Beyond East and West,” unpublished paper, 2003.

³⁴ El Fadl, p. 104.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

³⁶ Buck-Morss, p. 44.