

Hartford Seminary, December 3, 2004

I would like to thank Professor Jane Smith for inviting me to take part in this Christian-Muslim dialogue about scripture. Although this is the first time we've met, my engagement with her work dates back several years to when I read her essays on women in early Islam and on Islamic images of "Eve," an issue that she explored with Yvonne Haddad over two decades ago. That sort of pioneering work helped to pave the way for later scholarship in the field, including my own.

Jane sent us four questions that she said were meant to guide our conversation and I am going to address myself to those in the twenty minutes allocated to me.

### 1. What compelled me to make the study of scripture part of my life's work?

I would say that both positive and negative reasons compelled me to integrate a study of the Qur'an into my work.

On a positive note, my sense of myself as a Muslim woman is closely linked to my understanding of the Qur'an's teachings, so studying these teachings was a practical way for me to try and harmonize my life with them.

I also feel a deep yearning to know God and there seems to be no better way to do that than by reflecting on the Qur'an which is, after all, divine speech. To put it simply, then, one of the factors that brought me to study the Qur'an was the desire to give meaning to my life as a believer.

However, I won't pretend that only positive reasons explain my orientation towards the Qur'an; unfortunately, negative ones also had a great deal to do with my intellectual and spiritual investment in studying it.

Among these are my experiences of being born and living in a Muslim society (that is, Pakistan) until the mid 1980s. Although I belong to a privileged class and enjoyed all sorts of privileges, I was nonetheless also discriminated against as a woman specially when I was going through a divorce.

One of the things that became quite clear to me then was that there's a huge gap between the rights that the Qur'an gives Muslim women and the rights that Muslim states and communities are willing to give them. Spending most of my life in Pakistan also made me realize that Pakistani culture is so deeply infused with assumptions of male privilege that even the lowliest of men feels superior to the most accomplished woman. Regrettably, as I've found, this ideology of male supremacy is pervasive in virtually all Muslim societies.

As I've had occasion to say before, what bothers me most about this fact is that a majority of Muslims believes that the Qur'an itself teaches that men are superior to women and that women are inferior and subordinate to men. But that is not

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my own understanding of the Qur'an and I've always felt that such readings of it are terribly irreligious because they reduce and corrupt our idea of God.

For the last twenty years I've lived in the U.S. and while my experiences here have been quite different from those in Pakistan, I have found little cultural space in which I can express my identity as a Muslim freely and fully.

In large measure this has to do with the fact that most people know abysmally little about Islam and what they do is usually in the form of noxious stereotypes about the hijab, the harem, and now, holy war. It's a struggle to get people to be interested in Islam or Muslims beyond these three Hs, as I call them.

Of course 9/11 has spurred a new interest in Islam but I feel it's for the wrong reasons since many people, if not the majority, are only interested in the Qur'an to the extent that they can draw randomly on it to prove that "Allah loves terrorists" as someone said in response to a talk I gave at Stanford last week.

So part of my intent in showing that the Qur'an can be, and indeed *should* be, read as a liberatory and antipatriarchal text was to challenge the negative public discourses about Islam in the U.S.

### 2. Do I consider myself a feminist by any definition?

Well, it depends on whose definition we are speaking about!

In general I've resisted the label feminist because a Qur'anic epistemology also allows me to contest assertions of male privilege, or patriarchy broadly defined. In other words, I do not feel that only a feminist epistemology opens up the space to argue against patriarchy or on behalf of sexual equality.

But, having said that, I'm also open to interrogating my own resistance to calling myself a feminist. Earlier this year I had a wonderful exchange with Margot Badran who defines Islamic feminism as "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 in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum."

Margot says she has derived this definition partly from my work as well as that of Amina Wadud's and my response to her is that if *this* is Islamic feminism, then clearly I am an Islamic feminist.

In fact, if this is Islamic feminism, one would assume that all Muslims would be Islamic feminists since we all read the same Qur'an. But the truth is that not all of us read the Qur'an *in the same way*.

Lots of Muslim feminists, for instance, believe that Islam is a patriarchal and misogynistic religion that "professes models of hierarchical relationships and

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sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience.”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Fatima Mernissi, perhaps one of the best known Muslim feminists in the West, and she is not alone in this sort of portrayal of Islam.

In fact a central creed of a lot of Muslim feminist theorizing is that religion is oppressive because God “himself” is oppressive. Such feminists not only don’t derive their mandate from the Qur’an, but they don’t even bother to read it.

However, this hasn’t kept many of them from making false and pejorative claims about it based on what they hear other Muslims saying or see them doing.

My critique of such feminists is that they fail to distinguish between scripture and people’s lives; i.e., they confuse Islam with Muslims. They also confuse the Qur’an with its patriarchal readings or, rather, *misreadings*, which I find ironic given that feminists have also been the first to argue that meanings are socially constructed and that knowledge-creation is not always favorable to women.

Of course, there are many different types of feminisms which is why I began by saying that what I call myself depends on what sort of feminism we are talking about.

As long as Islamic feminism, as Margot has defined it, is not part of mainstream Muslim consciousness I don’t feel that it serves any purpose for me to call myself a feminist and indeed feel that I run the risk of misrepresenting my work if I do.

But then it may be an illusion to think that one has complete freedom to define oneself or that other people will accept one’s self-definition. For instance, even though I don’t call myself a feminist, many Muslims have sworn not to read my work because to them it’s just feminist rubbish as one of them said on BBC.

### 3. Why is the study of passages of scripture dealing with women important?

I think it’s important to study such passages in order to recover the Qur’an’s message of equality that seems to have been lost during our history.

When I say the Qur’an’s message of equality I am referring in particular to its teaching that human beings originated in a single *nafs*, or self, that God made women and men each other’s *awliya*, or friends/ guides; and that God put love and mercy, *sukun*, between the hearts of wives and husbands.

Significantly, there is no concept of original sin or the Fall in the Qur’an and while Muslims have read all manner of male privilege and discrimination against women into the Qur’an, there simply is no Qur’anic evidence for the idea that women are inherently sinful or ontologically different than men.

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.

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When I speak of the Qur'an's message of equality I am also referring to the many verses that directly address women. One of my favorite passages reads:

For Muslim men and women,--  
For believing men and women,  
For devout men and women,  
For men and women who are  
Patient and constant, for men  
And women who humble themselves,  
For men and women who give  
In charity, for men and women  
Who fast (and deny themselves).  
For men and women who  
Guard their chastity, and  
For men and women who  
Engage much in God's praise  
For them has God prepared  
Forgiveness and great reward.<sup>23</sup>

Studying and emphasizing such passages is essential for affirming the equality of men and women and for challenging those aspects of Muslim tradition that run counter to the Qur'an's teachings by denying women agency and equality.

I know that this is true of aspects of Christian and Jewish traditions as well: that they distort, over-rule, and subvert the egalitarian aspects of scripture and this is certainly true of aspects of Muslim tradition and religious knowledge.

As the late Fazlur Rahman used to say, the Qur'an's influence in many Muslim societies has been replaced by that of secondary religious texts which generally are the source of misogyny and sexism that people now associate with Islam.

This is why it is imperative to study the Qur'an and to try and disentangle it from the confluence of texts and traditions that have drowned out its own voice.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that Muslim tradition is a monolith or that all of it is hostile to women or to their engagement with scripture. To the contrary, a famous tradition holds that when the Qur'an was being revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, his wife Umm Salama asked him why it was not addressing women. (The verse I just quoted was evidently revealed after she asked him that.)

I see Umm Salama's question as an illustration of the inner workings of a divine pedagogy<sup>4</sup> that suggests that asking the right questions of God is necessary for a

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<sup>2</sup> 33:35; in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an* (NY: Tehrike Tersile Qur'an, 1988) p. 1116-17.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Ulises Ali Mejias for this insight.

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meaningful encounter with God. After all, God could have made women the subjects of divine discourse without a woman having to question God. Perhaps the very act of questioning provides the most important lesson for Muslims then.

And of course Umm Salama's question reveals that much before the advent of modernity, feminism, and the study of language and forms of human subjectivity, some pre-modern, illiterate, Muslim women were thinking critically about the role of language in shaping their sense of self. If that were not so, Umm Salama would probably not have asked her question, and if her question was not important, presumably God would not have heeded it.

From this last fact I also infer that for divine discourse to speak to us—and here I want to say specially women—we must also continue asking questions of it.

This does not necessarily mean focusing only on the verses pertaining to women, but, given that dominant readings of the Qur'an do not do justice to the Qur'an or to women, it does mean trying to recuperate the Qur'an's own egalitarianism.

### 4. In what way, and to what extent, is my scripture authoritative (“the word of God”) in my life?

Perhaps the answer to this question is obvious in what I've said so far and if it is not, then I would say that I derive my sense of direction in life from the Word of God which is what the Qur'an is to Muslims, quite literally, I may add.

The Qur'an tells me that God is Unrepresentable and beyond sex/gender; that God's justice lies in never transgressing against the rights of humans; that God's mercy precedes God's wrath; that God does not belong to me but that I belong to God; that wherever I look, there is the Face of God; that God is the sustainer of both East and West; that all matters wherein we differ are not ours to resolve but must go back to God; that there is no compulsion in religion and that submission to God, to be meaningful, must be freely chosen.

My scripture is authoritative in my life to the extent that I look to it to guide my engagement with myself and with others; to sustain me in times of trial and self-doubt; to heal me in the face of hatred and war and ignorance and apathy and intolerance; to still the fear in my heart; to increase me in knowledge; to allow me to keep looking within, but also beyond myself, for the possibilities and promise of life and always, always, to keep me humble in the service of God.