

Mainstreaming Extremism
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I am honored to be invited to address the annual convention of the Muslim Public Affairs Council on Countering Political and Religious Extremism. My charge, I was told, is to focus on the impact of Muslim extremism on women from a theological and, specifically, a Qur'anic perspective.

After struggling with myself for a bit, I decided to title my talk "Mainstreaming Extremism" because I wasn't sure how else to name the problem that I want to speak about, which is how Muslims in the mainstream—perfectly reasonable, temperate and good-willed Muslims—become complicit in women's oppression. In particular, I want to discuss how these Muslims justify a religious knowledge that is steeped in patriarchal assumptions, most notably, the idea that the Qur'an itself advocates sexual hierarchies and inequalities between women and men.

I will follow this critique by providing an argument from the Qur'an against letting our understanding of Islam become hostage to extremism.

Who are the extremists?

Given how much is riding on the term extremism itself, I want to clarify my own usage of it which is very different from the current political lexicon.

Following 9/11, extremism has come to be used interchangeably with terrorism and almost exclusively for Muslims. In fact, from being merely descriptive of those Muslims who are "against us"—in the memorable words of Mr. Bush—the term terrorist has evolved into an ontological claim about Islam being militant.

On Washington's sliding scale what makes Islam militant or moderate is how well a particular interpretation or practice of Islam harmonizes with its own political agendas; those that do not are branded "militant Islam" while those that are more conducive to U.S. policy goals are dubbed "moderate Islam."

As I've had occasion to say before, this view of Islam as a pair of good and evil twins conjoined at the hip makes it seem that all threats to the global system arise in this internecine struggle within Islam thus deflecting attention away from any culpability the U.S. may have, as the world's only hegemon and superpower, for some of the mess that many countries are in.

Personally, I do not think that it is productive to shoe-horn Muslims into two camps or to speak about Islam in anthropomorphic terms as if it were a man and an incurably schizophrenic one at that! Instead, it is more accurate to speak about the diversity in Muslim approaches to Islam recognizing that extremist or moderate interpretations aren't the only two possible permutations of Islam, and recognizing, too, that such categories are never completely pure. My own

Mainstreaming Extremism

Asma Barlas

argument, for instance, aims to show how extremism can become normative in the mainstream.

In the simple dictionary meaning of the term, extremism is the quality of being extreme, while an extremist is “one who advocates or resorts to measures beyond the norm, specially in politics.”¹

Since I am interested in defining the norm in religion, the question for me is what is, or should be, the norm for Muslims and for an answer, I look to the Qur’an. The normative model of Islam that I find in the Qur’an is its depiction of Islam as *sirat ul mustaqeem*, a straight path and also a *middle* path that requires all those who walk upon it to avoid excesses and compulsion in religion and “to hold fast by the best in the precepts,”² as God also tells Moses to instruct his people. Indeed, the Qur’an tells us that *all* “Those who listen to the word and follow the best (meaning) in it . . . are the ones whom God has guided.”³

In effect, the Qur’anic norm is to avoid extremism by embracing the best in it, and I contend that reading misogyny and male supremacy into the Qur’an (in other words, reading it as a patriarchal text) does not amount to embracing the best in the precepts given to us in and by the Qur’an. In fact, as I argue in my book, “*Believing Women*” in Islam, the Qur’an makes a strong case against patriarchy and in favor of sexual equality thus giving us scriptural sanction to contest violence and discrimination against women from within an Islamic framework.

To me, then, extremists, in a strictly Qur’anic sense, are those who force their own understanding of Islam onto others *as well as* those who read the Qur’an as a patriarchal text. In other words, extremists are not only people like the Taliban who hated and persecuted women, but also those who, while being considerate and loving to women themselves, nonetheless follow the consensus of the *ummah* which is to accept patriarchal readings of the Qur’an that oppress women.

Regrettably, by this definition, the mainstream itself has become extremist or, to put it differently, extremism has been mainstreamed. But because mainstream Muslims are *not* like the Taliban, it is harder to see how in one form or another, at one time or another, on one issue or another, we also are extremists, unaware and benign extremists, but extremists all the same.

Significantly, it is only when we attempt to define extremism from the vantage point of women that we can begin to see how it exists in the mainstream. That is why women’s issues always need to be treated as communal issues.

So how does benign extremism, as I am going to call it, function?

¹ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Houghton Mifflin (Fourth edition), 2000.

² 7: 145 in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988: 383

³ 39:18 in Ali, 1241.

Mainstreaming Extremism

Asma Barlas

How does benign extremism function?

Here I am going to draw on my own experiences both as a Muslim woman who was born in a Muslim society and who lived in it for most of my life, and also as an academic who has had the opportunity to speak to diverse Muslim audiences over the last several years, both in the U.S. and abroad.

The mainstream extremist (and he is usually a man) recognizes the rights that Islam gives to women and is even willing to enter into a conversation with them, but as soon as one begins to talk about who has the right to define religious meaning and to question why only men's work is considered authoritative, the dialogue comes to a sudden and unpleasant end.

In fact, sometimes the dialogue flounders even if one does no more than present a reading of Qur'an that de-links God from women's oppression, as I have done. The same benign extremist who a moment ago was extolling the high status of women in Islam and the important role that women played during the early stages of Muslim history, will turn around and tell me, in different words and with different degrees of condescension, that my work will never gain currency in the Muslim community because text and tradition and reason won't permit it.

But how exactly do text, tradition, and reason militate against women?⁴ Or, more accurately, how do benign extremists draw on them to silence and marginalize women in the name of a religion that they admit elevates women?

As it turns out, in the benign extremist's view, Islam elevates Muslim women only over other, that is to say, non-Muslim, women; it certainly does not put them on a par with Muslim *men*. As the benign extremist will point out, the Qur'an puts men in charge of women, establishes God's preference for them, gives them the right to marry several wives, allocates them a larger share in inheritance, and even instructs husbands to beat disobedient wives, a verse that many Muslim men read more generically as authorizing all men to beat any woman.

So, to benign extremists, no less than to the Taliban style extremists, Islam offers an irrefutable case against women and there's nothing to be done about it.

But if one tells the benign extremist that his understanding of such verses rests on solitary words and phrases and that all those verses can be read differently, or if one points out that mainstream understandings of the Qur'an have to do with *who* has read it historically, *how*, and in *what* contexts; that is, if one mentions that the Qur'an has been read in patriarchal societies, only by men, and by means of a flawed methodology, the benign extremist barricades himself behind tradition.

⁴ The following discussion draws on my talk, "Text, Tradition, and Reason: The Qur'an and Sexual Politics," delivered at Cardozo Law School, Yeshiva University, October 10-14, 2004.

Mainstreaming Extremism

Asma Barlas

It is in the name of tradition—in particular, the notion of a timeless consensus or *ijma*—that he cautions you against questioning patriarchal readings of the Qur'an which, he will tell you, have withstood the test of time and have been passed down from generation to generation without any dispute.

What becomes significant to his narrative at this point is not the content of Qur'anic exegesis, which may well undermine our concept of God as Just, but scholarly genealogies and Muslim history neither of which, the benign extremist feels, can be subjected to a critique, other than by himself of course.

However, if one takes issue with this view, at once partial and monolithic, of tradition and points out 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 traditions (*hadith*) about his life than anyone else, that is, as soon as one emphasizes the role of women in constructing tradition, the benign extremist seeks refuge in reason.

It is now in the name of reason rather than history that he will smugly tell you that just because women can read the Qur'an does not mean that anyone is going to listen to them; no indeed! Such readings will never become part of Muslim public reason and are best confined to the privacy of one's own home.

However, if one tells the benign extremist that public reason does not fall from the sky but reflects the power relationships in a given society, or that for this very reason, it is not always just or humane (one only has to consider that public reason once legitimized slavery), or that women's readings of the Qur'an can help to reframe reason and make it more inclusive, the benign extremist will retreat to the text once more, or, rather, to the idea of the fixity of the meaning of the text which he will read as confirming women's inferiority once and for all.

We thus come full circle to where we started and here the conversation ends.

I have argued elsewhere that it is impossible for Muslim women to escape from this circle of oppression and the circular logic that allows benign extremists to move from text to tradition to reason to text in search of proof that "Islam" rather than specific readings of it generated by men sanction women's oppression.

The only option left to women after this exchange, is to admit defeat and walk away, duly chastised, but sometimes they are not even allowed to do that. Talk after talk of mine has ended with older Muslim men feeling too affronted and the younger too angry to speak with me. As for the sympathetic ones, they tell me that everything I've said about women's rights in Islam was obvious to them all along and then they proceed to discipline me on my understanding of the Qur'an, my tone, my use of specific words, and even on things I've not said.

How does one counter this genial, well-meaning, and relentless assault on one simply for saying that we should read the Qur'an in new and liberatory ways rather than as a text that projects misogyny and discrimination onto the divine?

How can we counter extremism?

Quite frankly, I don't know. Or, rather, the only way I know is to continue to reason with people in the "best possible way," as the Qur'an advises us to do. I take this to mean that religious knowledge is amenable to rational discourse, and so I persist in saying certain things because for every pair of ears that tunes me out, I believe that several more may be attuned to my message. To these pairs of ears, I offer the following argument against benign extremism from the Qur'an.

First, injecting sexism, violence, inequality, and theories of male privilege into the Qur'an corrupts our idea of a just God who never transgresses against the rights of humans (never does *zulm* to them) and who is above sexual bias and partisanship. (I make this argument in a more nuanced and refined way in my book for anyone who is interested in it.)

Second, we need to take responsibility for how we interpret Islam; after all, there is no ordained clergy or institution comparable to a church in Islam, or at least in Sunni Islam, which means that the onus is on believers themselves to interpret it.

Naturally, when we read a text within a community, our understanding of it can never be wholly free of the community's understanding of it and indeed, if we find a conflict between the two, we feel inclined to subordinate the personal to the communal in the name of tradition or, rather, the dominant view of tradition. But, just as some elements of tradition ensure our survival, others impede and impair our moral growth by freeing us from the need to think for ourselves. Perhaps that is why taking responsibility for our own understanding of divine truth is central to the Qur'anic conception of moral individuality.

- Does the Qur'an not ask each one of us to use our own intellect and reasoning (*aql* and *ilm*) to reflect upon its *ayat*, or "signs" of God?
- Does the Qur'an not make it clear that no soul can bear the burdens of another but must stand forth, alone, on Judgment Day before God?
- Does the Qur'an not reserve some of its severest criticism for those who blindly follow the "ways of their fathers" without reflecting upon the meaning of divine truth for themselves?
- Does the Qur'an not instruct children that if their parents "strive to make thee join in worship with Me things of which *thou hast no knowledge*, then obey them not?"⁵

I am well aware of the contexts in which these verses appear in the Qur'an, but I contend that they convey a universal message which is that, no matter how deep

⁵ 31:14-15 in Ali, 1083

Mainstreaming Extremism

Asma Barlas

our links to the community, each one of us will be held accountable for our own understanding (and practice) of our religion.

I don't believe Muslims have thought through the implications of such teachings for the relationship between individual and communal readings of the Qur'an; instead, we simply assume that the individual must always be subordinate to the *ummah* and that the communal norm is the Qur'anic norm, hence beyond error.

But as I have tried to show, the Qur'anic norm is *not* always the same as the *ummah's* norm, at least with respect to women. Nor does the Qur'an tell us that we are beyond error. It does not teach a theory of human infallibility; indeed, it reminds us that our history on earth originated in human error and fallibility!

Muslim history, like all other histories, is a testimony only to achievements and triumphs, but also wrong-doing and errors. So, to use our history as an alibi against rethinking our ideas and practices to make them better is an act of self-sabotage that will never allow us to progress beyond our past mistakes.

So what if historically Muslims have read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text? Does that mean we can never read it in better, more ethical, more egalitarian ways? So what if anti-women *tafsir* of the Qur'an or anti-women *hadith* can be found in the works of great scholars? Are we more invested in their reputations or in safe-guarding our conception of the divine? (I am thinking here of all those Muslims who can live happily with a misogynistic *hadith* because it is in "Sahih Bukhari" without wondering how the Prophet, who embodies the best in the Qur'an, would ascribe misogyny to God's speech and thence to God.)

If only scholars could understand the Qur'an, why would the Qur'an tell us that it came also for the unlettered Bedouin in the desert?

If scholars were infallible and could bear the burden of our understandings and misunderstandings of the Qur'an, why would the Qur'an insist that each one of us engage in an independent hermeneutical endeavor in order to understand it?

If collective readings of scripture were all that was required of believers, why would the Qur'an protect our individual freedom to read it in light of our own knowledge and reason? Is it not because God wants to give us the opportunity to respond to God's call? Is it not reckless disregard and self-defeating for us to refuse this charge?