

### *Interview: "The Qur'an Doesn't Support Patriarchy"*

Naufil Shahrukh talks to Asma Barlas on her feminist interpretations of Islam, with special reference to the post-9/11 world.

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#### **What is moderate Islam?**

I do not like labeling Islam (as moderate or extremist or feminist) because not only does it make the religion sound contradictory and schizophrenic, but it also obscures our own role in interpreting it. To me, it makes more sense to speak of moderate or extremist or liberal **interpretations** of Islam and of moderate or extremist or liberal Muslims. This is also why I don't like the label "political Islam." The truth is that Muslims use Islam for political purposes and that is a rather different thing. Here I should also mention the quick and dirty habit in the U.S. of speaking of Islam as if it were a person: Islam does this and Islam does that, Islam has locked itself inside a prison, and so on. It's utterly sloppy and incoherent and no one would think of speaking in the same way about Christianity or Judaism, for instance.

#### **What are Washington's objectives in particular and the West's in general when they want Muslims around the world to embrace moderate Islam?**

The objectives are to neutralize any political resistance to the U.S. The way the Bush administration has framed the issue one would think that if only "Islam" became moderate, all the problems in the world would disappear. The truth, of course, is that U.S. foreign policies are partly responsible for the political and economic inequalities and inequities that lead people (and not just Muslims) to oppose them. One cannot reduce all opposition to terrorism but it is becoming increasingly customary in the U.S. and the West to cast even legitimate political resistance to repression as terroristic.

#### **Can Islam and secularism co-exist?**

If by secularism you mean a government that does not enforce religious practice through coercion, that respects human rights and guarantees civil and political liberties to its citizens, and that is democratic and accountable to the people, why not? What is there in "Islam" that says that governments must manage the religious practice of individual Muslims, or be authoritarian, or undemocratic?

I know that many Muslims understand the Qur'anic injunction to enjoin the right and to forbid the wrong as a license for the state to manage the religious life of its citizens, but even the Prophet was forbidden to do that. His mission, as the Qur'an makes clear, was to proclaim God's message, not to enforce obedience to it; hence the Qur'anic emphasis on avoiding excesses and compulsion in religion. This impulse to cast politics in terms of the religious management of people's lives and to cast Islam in terms of a denial of political and human rights, has nothing to do with the teachings of our scripture. It has to do with certain

Muslim anxieties and, if I may say so, social pathologies.

**Is there a moderate secularism?**

Secularism also has its fundamentalists who are no less dogmatic about their beliefs than religious fanatics. However, what I find more disturbing is the ease with which liberal and secular states that are based in tolerance, human rights, democracy and liberty—states like the U.S., for instance—are able to engage in repressive, antidemocratic, and authoritarian practices abroad without too much opposition from their citizens. This is partly because we almost never talk about the violence done in the name of secular values because of our tendency to associate violence only with religion, and, post 9/11 almost exclusively with Islam.

**Is Washington's drive to enforce moderate Islam legitimate?**

I have already suggested the problems with framing the issue in this way. But, so long as we are talking about moderation, the Bush administration could also benefit from some moderation.

**Do you think the West is qualified to define what is Islam better than the Muslim world itself?**

There are Muslims in the West who are as qualified to define Islam as anyone in the "Muslim world" is (I put the phrase in quotes because it seems to imply that the Muslim world is a cognitive unity that exists separately from planet earth!) However, I suspect what you're asking is if non-Muslims in the West should be the ones to define Islam and I would say only those who practice a religion are best placed to define it. But this does not mean that one cannot benefit from a dialogue with people who have alternative understandings of the world.

**Can Muslims in the West live in accordance to their religious beliefs?**

It is hazardous to speak on behalf of all Muslims in the West but I would say that, for the most part, yes. This does not mean that there are no restrictions placed on them and here I have in mind the ban on the head-scarf in France. However, to me this is no more problematic than forcing women to wear a veil in some Muslim countries. In both cases, the state is mandating women's dress which I believe should be strictly within the purview of individual Muslim women to choose. In cases where women are being forced to veil when the Qur'an does not call for certain forms of veiling, they also are not being allowed to live in accordance with their religious beliefs even in the so-called Muslim world.

**Do you think that the Hadith, Ijma-e-Sahaba, and the work of the early scholars (Imams) of Islam were all patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and that all, or a major part, of that work should be revised?**

I should clarify that when I speak about patriarchal interpretations I use two very specific definitions of patriarchy: as a form of father (and husband) rule

over women and as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males. My own understanding of the Qur'an is that not only does it not support either form of patriarchy, but that its teachings are fundamentally at odds with theories of male privilege. To me it seems obvious, then, that we need to rethink religious knowledge where this knowledge conflicts with the Qur'an's teachings. If this means questioning the knowledge produced by the imams you mention, what is wrong with that? None of the imams ever claimed that their work was complete or infallible and that it was incapable of being reformed. The Qur'an is a universal text applicable for all times. One cannot undercut its universality by claiming that it could only be understood by four scholars for all of eternity! To me this is blasphemy because it elevates human beings over the word of God.

**According to some religious scholars "equity" between men and women is more appropriate a term than that of "equality." Is it correct?**

Equity and equality are very hard terms to define in practice and even in the West the debate on what equality entails is far from over. As to why some Muslims like to use the word equity, I think it is because they feel that equality is a Western and feminist concept, hence somehow decadent. It's amazing how Muslims shortchange themselves! Equality is very much a Qur'anic concept and, in the Qur'an, sexual equality is ontological in that it is a function of our very being and existence since both women and men were created from the same *nafs*, or self. However, Muslims disregard this crucial principle in favor of three or four words or lines in the Qur'an that they read as establishing men as guardians over women and giving them the right to beat their wives, and so on. There are now several studies that show such readings to be flawed and misrepresentative of the Qur'an's teachings. Conveniently, however, many conservative Muslims who want to cling to patriarchal readings of the Qur'an dismiss this work on various pretexts in order not to have to deal with it.

**How was your book "*Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* received in the Muslim world?**

There is no monolithic Muslim world and even if there were, it would be hard to generalize. The book is being translated into Indonesian and of course now there is a South Asian edition but it has only just been released, so one has to wait and see. In the U.S., it has done very well since it is in its fourth printing in two years.

**What was the reason behind your leaving of your home country and settling in the US?**

I left Pakistan in 1983 after General Zia ul Haq had me dismissed from the Foreign Service on two charges: having called him a buffoon in my diary (which was turned over to him by my former husband's family as punishment for leaving a bad marriage), and for having said at a private dinner in the home of Pakistan's ambassador to the Philippines that the judiciary in Pakistan was neither free and nor fair (this was after the hanging of Mr. Bhutto in 1979). I was in the sixth year of my service when this happened and for a year or so I worked

as assistant editor of the *Muslim* in Islamabad. However, I eventually had to leave for reasons of personal safety and later received political asylum in the U.S. I did not mean to settle in the U.S., but life has its own way of unfolding and here I am, more than twenty years later. For a very long time, I felt that I had no real home but lately I've been trying to make peace with my life.

**Where is the actual problem—the misinterpreted and misused Hudood Act in Pakistan; or the Hudood law itself?**

I am not a legal scholar and cannot answer the specifics of this question. But I do want to note that the late Fazlur Rahman used to say that the Qur'an is not a law book but that we need to derive laws from it. The process of deriving the law is thus very much an interpretive act that is far from perfect; we should thus always be willing to entertain the possibility that some laws may not be consonant with the Qur'an's teachings. I say this as a general proposition.

As for the implementation of the Hudood laws in Pakistan, I would say that it has been terribly egregious because the weight of all moral crimes has fallen disproportionately on women. There are thousands of women languishing in Pakistan's jails while the men with whom they are alleged to have committed sexual crimes have magically disappeared. How just is that? And how just is it not to be able to distinguish, from a strictly legal perspective, between rape and consensual sex so that a victim of rape is actually treated as the criminal? And how "Islamic" is it to mandate stoning to death for adultery when the Qur'an doesn't mandate such a punishment for any crime? It is true that the Prophet (pbuh) sanctioned this punishment for a Jewish couple taken in adultery since he was judging them by their own law. How has stoning become part of Islamic law?

**The US and the West have always supported the Muslim states where Islam is used as a tool to enforce the writ of patriarchal monarchies or authoritarian forms of government, like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iraq (of 1980s). Do you think that there is a role of the West in promoting patriarchal Islam?**

Oh, absolutely! And that is partly why I find all this pious talk about "moderate Islam" on the part of the U.S. and "the West" so hypocritical and galling.

**What can be done to liberate Muslims from the holds of patriarchal interpretations of Islam?**

Since I have already suggested that the Qur'an is not a patriarchal text, I would say reading the Qur'an in light of new understandings of the world that come as the result of living in this world; of educating Muslims so that, among other things, they can read the Qur'an for themselves; challenging the authority of all those readings of the Qur'an that project sexual preferences and hatred onto God; punishing tribal notions of "honor" that allow men to exercise the right of life and death over their female relatives, and working to develop an Islamic praxis of sexual equality. However, I realize that for any of this to happen, there needs to be far reaching social, economic, and political reform so that Muslim

societies become more egalitarian and democratic. For me, the challenge isn't identifying what needs to be done, but finding the means to do what needs to be done and that's a totally different question.