

Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam

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I would like to thank Prof. Dale Stover of the Department of Philosophy and Religion for inviting me to give the Anderberg Lecture, to Zahra Cheema for introducing me, and to all of you for coming to hear me tonight.

I'm going to speak for about half an hour and we can then have a dialogue, and please feel free to question me about issues that you're interested in beyond those that I will cover in my talk. (I have given a copy of my talk to Prof. Stover in case anyone wants to follow up on the authors I am going to quote since it's difficult to give full citations in a lecture.)

As a way to situate both you and myself, and by way of an introduction, I want to begin by making two observations about Islam in America.

Misrecognizing Islam

First, since 9/11, it has become clear that most non-Muslim Americans don't know very much about Islam and, until recently, weren't particularly interested in finding out about it either.

This is astonishing given that Islam is as much a part of Abrahamic monotheism as are Judaism and Christianity and given also that ever since Islam's advent some 1,400 years ago, Muslims, Jews, and Christians, have lived in what some scholars of religion call "intertwined worlds."⁽¹⁾

My own view is that American ignorance of Islam is cultivated, not accidental, and that it arises in an age-old politics of misrecognition that "confuses Islam with Muslims, disregards the role of political, economic, cultural, and historical factors in shaping not only Muslim attitudes and actions, but also their readings of Islam, and denies Western⁽²⁾ complicity in creating many of the conditions that are conducive"⁽³⁾ to religious extremism and not just on the part of some Muslims.

In such a milieu, learning about Islam requires unlearning deeply entrenched modes of ignorance and nonrecognition and while some people are open to such a possibility, most can see no stake in doing so since an instrumentalist view of knowledge has left them with the idea that there's no value in learning about things that don't impact their own lives in immediate and tangible ways.

This brings me to my second point, which is that much of the current interest in Islam seems to be motivated by the desire to find clues in it to 9/11. While this

may be understandable, it is hardly conducive to understanding the religion, as I've found out from my own experiences.

At a forum on my campus last year, some people tried to make me and other Muslims on a panel speak on behalf of the hijackers and to condemn Islam as terroristic, and when we resisted doing so, they got very upset. One of them even wrote a letter to the school paper impugning our identities as Muslims. Later in the year, a philosophy professor—who routinely send me the worst things she can find in the media about Islam—called me, wanting to know if terrorists would strike during Ramadan because she wanted to make some decisions about her stocks!

In such a milieu, as I'm sure you can imagine, it is difficult to speak about Islam in a meaningful way; at best, what one has to say falls on deaf ears if it is something people don't expect or want to hear; at worst, one can be attacked or reprimanded, specially if one refuses to accept responsibility for the actions of other Muslims.

Now, apart from the fact that I am not the voice of one billion Muslims, I also don't think that it's productive to look to Islam, or to its scripture, the Qur'an, to explain 9/11. As the old adage goes, even the devil can quote scripture, though this doesn't mean scripture itself is fiendish. Yet, many people—including Muslims—accept quite dubious readings of the Qur'an, ignoring that there is a connection between whohow and what they read it to be saying.

Also, as Robin Wright argues, “mining the Quran for incendiary quotes is essentially pointless. Religions evolve, and there is usually enough ambiguity in their founding scriptures to let them evolve in any direction. If Osama Bin Laden were a Christian, and he still wanted to destroy the World Trade Center, he would cite Jesus' rampage against the money-changers. If he didn't want to destroy the World Trade Center, he could stress the Sermon on the Mount.”(4)

I don't believe that scriptural ambiguity alone explains why religions evolve in certain directions rather than in others, but, clearly, we can read the same text in different ways. And to the extent that we can, I think the more appropriate question to ask is: why does a community come to regard certain interpretations and ideas as authentic, authoritative, or canonical?

This is one of the questions I attempt to answer in my own work and basically, I argue that the meanings that Muslims historically have produced from the Qur'an are a function of how religious knowledge itself was produced and, in turn, that is a function of how not only religious, but also secular, power and authority were configured in early Muslim societies. I focus on the early period because after the tenth century, Muslims came to believe that the door to further interpretive

reasoning had been closed though there is no ruling to this effect and not every Muslim has accepted this premise, especially in modern times.

Before I talk about my work, however, I want to share with you briefly some reasons why I was drawn to it.

Experiencing Islam

I'm originally from Pakistan, the second largest Muslim country in the world, which was created in 1947 when the British, then the colonizing power in India, partitioned it in the wake of a nationalist movement by Indian Muslims. However, even though it was created in the name of Islam, it wasn't until the 1980s that Pakistan embarked on a program of Islamization under pressures from a military general, Zia ul Haq, who came to power through a coup.

One of the things Zia did was to implement the Sharia, or Muslim law, rather selectively and this had some horrendous consequences for women because, among other things, the Sharia legalizes sexual inequality, fails to distinguish between rape, adultery, and extramarital sex, and prescribes the punishment of stoning to death for sex crimes, even though the Qur'an itself does not call for stoning for any crime (Jewish and Christian laws do, for adultery).

A case that became quite notorious involved a blind woman servant who was raped by her employer and became pregnant. The court took this as proof of her guilt and sentenced her to be stoned, although the sentence was never carried out. The rapist, meanwhile, went free because, being blind, she couldn't identify him. However, even if she could see, the court would have discounted her testimony because the Sharia equates the testimony of two women with that of one man.

Now, this is a gross perversion of the Qur'an's teachings since, only in one instance of evidence giving out of five, does the Qur'an allow for such an arrangement. In other cases it does not and in fact, in the case of adultery, it gives precedence to a woman's testimony. If a man accuses his wife of adultery and does not have four male witnesses to bear out his story, the Qur'an allows the wife to be her own witness; if she swears her innocence, it gives her husband no further recourse against her. But, of course, the jurists who formulated the Sharia did not take this to mean that men should testify in fives, or that women were superior to men! And this returns us to issues of interpretation.

So far as the Sharia goes, as a Muslim legal scholar, Abdullahi An-Naim, points out, it is a "product of the intellectual, social, and political processes of Muslim history"(5) and "was constructed by its founding jurists."(6) Not only that, but it also does not always conform to the Qur'an's teachings (as I've just pointed out), and nor to the Prophet's practice (the Sunnah), the two primary sources of

religious authority in Islam. However, because most Muslims have reduced Islam to the Sharia, they are unwilling to entertain the idea that it can, or should, be reformed.

I left Pakistan in 1983 and wasn't impacted negatively by the Sharia, but I was able to see how the state became involved in underwriting certain interpretations of Islam as a way of ensuring its own hegemony. And, of course, I also was able to see for myself the "striking difference between what can be safely inferred from the Qur'an itself and what has frequently been read into it."(7)

My experiences of Islam in the US have been rather different. These days, of course, we Muslims are being invited to "show and tell" panels where we're put on display and expected to prove to everyone else how normal and ordinary we really are! But even before this, I was always being called upon to explain Islam in the context of pre-existing discourses about the harem and the veil and, now, of holy wars. And when I point out that the harem and the veil are as much a part of Jewish and Christian tradition and history as they are of Muslim, and that the Qur'an does not teach the concept of holy war, many people feel rather let down.

Now, when I read the Qur'an in the privacy of my home, I always read it as teaching the precept of sexual equality, though I have to confess that when I was younger, I did not understand the logic behind some of its teachings, specially about polygyny and what many Muslims read as advocacy of male privilege and control of women, including the right to beat disobedient wives. To me, such provisions seemed at odds with what I saw as its generally egalitarian stance on equality.

It wasn't until much later, when I began to teach Middle East politics, that I came to understand the deeply political nature of reading and interpretation and the close relationship between Qur'anic hermeneutics and Muslim history.

I was particularly fascinated to read a history of Qur'anic exegesis that showed how it became more restrictive towards women over time, mirroring the historical and political circumstances of the Muslim community, as well as those in which specific Qur'an scholars lived. And, I was deeply impacted by the realization that, as Leila Ahmed says, different readings of the same texts can yield "fundamentally different Islams"(8) for women. (I think we've seen the truth of that statement most recently in how the Taliban chose to interpret and practice Islam.) And this is what eventually brought me to study both the Qur'an and the history of Qur'anic interpretation critically.

"Believing Women"

I said earlier that it is futile to look to the Qur'an to explain 9/11; I also believe that it's not very helpful to look to it to explain the abysmal status of women in most Muslim societies because not only do Muslims not always adhere to the Qur'an's teachings, but they also can twist some lines in it to justify violence and misogyny.

However, for precisely this reason, I believe that it is crucial to reject sexist and violent readings of the Qur'an because of their potential to impact the lives of Muslim women and part of my intention in writing my book was to challenge such readings of Islam.

I do this on the basis of several claims, one of which is that while "multiple readings are not per se mutually exclusive, not all interpretations are thereby equal."⁽⁹⁾ In other words, one can determine between the contextual legitimacy of different readings based on methodological criteria alone.

The Qur'an, for instance, provides us some methodological principles for its own readings; thus, among other things, it tells to read it for its best meanings, to read it as a thematic whole rather than piecemeal, selectively, or in a decontextualized way, and to privilege its foundational (clear) verses (ayat) over the allegorical ones. As I show in my work, applying these principles to read the Qur'an yields much better and more egalitarian interpretation of its teachings than readings that focus on one or two words, or lines, or verses, thereby misrepresenting them.

But, even more importantly, I argue that Muslims can arrive at more egalitarian readings of the Qur'an if they base their readings in a sound theological understanding of God, or of Divine Self-Disclosure, by which I mean how God describes God in the Qur'an since, for Muslims, the Qur'an is the Word of God and we cannot understand it independently of how we visualize God.

In this context, I consider the hermeneutic implications of three aspects of God's Self-Disclosure for reading the Qur'an. For example, the theologeme of Tawhid maintains that God is One and that God's Sovereignty is indivisible. Inasmuch as this is so, I believe that we should not read the Qur'an as designating men as rulers over women or as intermediaries between God and women as this leads to male worship and thus constitutes a heresy, or shirk.

Similarly, the Qur'an teaches that God's Justice consists in never transgressing against the rights of humans. As such, I believe we also should not read God's Speech as teaching transgression against the rights of humans. Since patriarchies do transgress against women's rights by abusing and oppressing them, I believe that the Qur'an cannot possibly endorse them and that we have to read its provisions with this basic idea in mind.

Additionally, I also apply a very clear definition of patriarchy to read the Qur'an in support of my claims. Basically, by patriarchy, I mean a system of sexual hierarchies and inequalities that privileges men over women both in their biological capacity as males and also in their social roles of fathers/husbands (in fact the two are related).

In religious patriarchies, this system draws on re-presentations of God as male (and, in the case of Christianity, as Father) and such representations then serve to justify "rule by the father/ husband" over women. Even Muslims, who don't sacralize God as Father, nonetheless draw on masculinist representations of God to justify male rule over women.

Therefore, by patriarchal interpretations I mean those that re-present God as male/ Father, or teach that God has a special affinity with males, or that males embody Divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful, or that rule by the father/husband is Divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule.

However, sexual inequality and patriarchal privileges don't derive only from religious texts; modern secular theories also advocate gender differentiations, dualisms, and inequalities on the basis of biological differences between women and men; i.e., they confuse sex with its social constructions. Therefore, by patriarchal interpretations, I also mean readings that confuse biology with gender or that re-present man as the Self (normative) and woman as the Other (aberrant).

I apply these two definitions of patriarchy to read the Qur'an's teachings about God as well as about human creation, ontology, sexuality, and marital relationships, including marriage, divorce, and polygyny, and I show that the Qur'an not only does not advocate sexual inequality or patriarchy, but that it also can be read as an egalitarian and antipatriarchal text.

To begin, the Qur'an not does not sacralize God as Father or male; indeed, it explicitly forbids using similitude for God. Nor does it sacralize fathers or fatherhood, as I show in my reading of the Qur'anic narratives of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad.

The Qur'an also does not establish men as ontologically superior to women or as rulers over them, or even as heads of the household. The word *qawammun*, usually is translated as care-takers, managers, or guardians refers to the act of providing for a household, not to rulership. In fact, the Qur'an designates women and men as each other's *awliya*, or guides, and "in-charge,"⁽¹⁰⁾ and establishes love and mutuality as the basis of marriage.

In Islam sexual equality is ontological in that the Qur'an teaches that humans originated in a single self (nafs). It does not privilege the man by prioritizing his creation or by endowing him with attributes or faculties not given to women. Indeed, the Qur'an does not define men and women in terms of masculine or feminine traits since it takes humans to "manifest the whole."

1 Lazarus-Yafeh, Hava. *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*. Princeton: University Press, 1992.

2 I understand that this is a problematic distinction (between Islam and the West) since Islam exists within the West. But here I'm referring to non-Muslim Western views of Islam.

3 Asma Barlas, "Jihad=Holy War=Terrorism: The Politics of Conflation and Denial," forthcoming in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (2003).

4 This excerpt from Robin Wright appeared in article circulated online for which I am not able to find a cite.

5 Abdullahi An-Naim. *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, Syracuse: University Press, 1990: xiv.

6 An-Naim, 14; xiv; his emphasis.

7 Neal Robinson. *Discovering the Quran: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*. London: SCM Press, 1996: 29.

8 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, 1992.

9 Quoted in Gerald O. West, ed. *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*. South Africa: Cluster Publications, second, revised edition, 1995: 149.

10 Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or, How Did We Ever Get into This Mess?" *Women's Studies International Forum*, Special Issue: Women and Islam, 5. no. 2 (1982).