

# Sacred Knowledge and Women's Rights in Islam

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I would like to thank the Muslim Students Association of Columbia University, and specially Duha Mohiuddin, for inviting me to speak to you tonight.

I'm going to talk about sacred knowledge and women's rights in Islam and I will do so with a focus on both hermeneutics and history, which seems appropriate given that this is Women's History Month.

My aim, however, is not to give you a history of women's rights, or even a list of these rights. Rather, it is to provide you a context for understanding how sacred and religious knowledge shapes the discourse on Muslim women's rights.

Much of this talk is based on "Believing Women," and I want to apologize to those of you who already know its main arguments for repeating them. Unfortunately, one of the hazards of speaking about the book so often is that I can't avoid cannibalizing myself!

But, to keep things interesting, I will begin with the different sets of tensions I negotiate in the book rather than presenting these tensions as a conclusion, as I did in the book.

Although my focus is on Islam, the issues I intend to raise are really quite broad and I hope that even those of you who aren't Muslim or religious will still find some of these issues meaningful.

## Mapping the terrain

Let me begin by defining sacred and religious knowledge as I see them.

By sacred knowledge, I mean the teachings of Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, which Muslims regard, quite literally, as the word of God and, as such, perfect, timeless, and unchanging.

By religious knowledge, I mean all attempts to engage, explain, and interpret the Qur'an, hence Muslim religious discourse in general. Like many other Muslims, though not the majority, I view this discourse as limited, fallible, and historically bound.

Obviously, there are deep connections between sacred and religious knowledge, but that does not mean they are interchangeable or reducible to one another. In fact, alongside the connections, there are also significant gaps and disjunctures between these two modes of knowledge, and it is in these fissures that I locate both the ideological and the historical roots of Muslim women's oppression.

To take a particularly egregious example, the Taliban could carry out their anti-women pogrom in Afghanistan in the name of Islam because they could regard their own tribal and misogynistic misreadings of it as correct and authentic.

This was so even though many, if not most, of the features of their pogrom—like prohibiting women from working, whipping them if their feet showed, forcing them to cover their faces, and so on—have nothing to do with the Qur'an's teachings or even many of the teachings of the secondary religious texts.

That is why I refer to the Taliban's reading of Islam as a misreading which implies of course that I believe there can be a correct reading of scripture.

And this brings me to a second set of tensions that I've engaged in my work that have to do with the very nature of interpretation.

On the one hand, as I mentioned previously, I accept the proposition that our interpretation of divine speech is bound to be imperfect and incomplete. On the other hand, however, I believe that we can have better and worse interpretations of it.

For instance, I don't view the dominant reading of Islam as a good reading. This reading maintains that Islam is a religious patriarchy that "professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality" and puts "a sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience" (Mernissi 1996: 13-14).

These are the words of Fatima Mernissi but this view is quite widespread not only among a certain brand of feminists, but also among Muslim patriarchs and conservatives. (Ironically, on this issue the Taliban and many feminists are on the same side though they would be horrified to admit this!)

In contrast to this reading, a number of Muslim scholars—and I'm one of them—offer an alternative one that is both liberatory and anti-patriarchal.

We also argue that the reason the Qur'an has been read in oppressive and patriarchal modes has to do with who has read the text historically, the method they've used to read it, and the contexts in which they have read it.

But once we open up questions of interpretive and textual polysemy/ pluralism, on what grounds can we argue against one reading or in defense of another? Aren't different readings equally legitimate and isn't knowledge itself relative?

And what if the community—assuming one can speak unproblematically of a billion Muslims in the singular—accepts patriarchal readings of the Qur'an as legitimate? And what if the community believes that challenging or historicizing these readings undermines the very core of Islamic belief and practice?

These questions uncover yet another set of tensions between hermeneutics and history which can be stated in terms of the following paradox:

On the one hand, most Muslims believe that not only sacred, but also religious knowledge is timeless and beyond history. On the other hand, however, they also privilege the knowledge produced in the first few centuries of Islam, including traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics, in the name of communal history.

This contradictory view is then used to defend early Qur'anic exegesis which is hostile to women, and to discourage new readings of the Qur'an, specially by women, and it is this that explains the discursive continuity on women's issues for 1,400 years among Muslims, as well as patriarchal readings of the Qur'an.

Engaging these tensions

Having mapped out these tensions, I should indicate how I try and negotiate them since, in the end, I can't really resolve them. To me, this isn't necessarily bad because it is in the interplay of the dialectic that we find new truths.

A starting point for me is the relationship between the Qur'an and its readings and, more specifically, the challenge of distinguishing between the two.

Many people are uncomfortable with terms like "the Qur'an itself" and with this distinction between a text and its interpretations and some regard it as a post-modern gesture that is entirely inappropriate when applied to the Qur'an.

In reality, however, the Qur'an itself distinguishes between itself as divine discourse and those who try to pass off their own work as such.

Indeed, it is on the basis of this distinction that the Prophet himself differentiates between the Qur'an and his own words. Thus, while the Qur'an in its present form was recited by the Prophet, not everything he said is included in it.

That may be why Muslim theology has also always distinguished between “the divine speech and its earthly realization,” as Josef Van Ess points out.

In large part it is the failure to observe this distinction between religion and our knowledge of religion, to use Abdolkarim Soroush’s phrase, that explains the long history of sexism and misogyny in Muslim societies.

This is not to say that Muslims invented sexism and misogyny or that they are peculiarly Islamic. Rather, in Muslim societies sexism and misogyny have found a new lease on life because of the view that God wills it, to echo the Crusader’s battle cry.

One can find a great deal in the secondary religious texts of Islam to support this view, and much more in these texts than in the Qur’an itself. And here I mean to point specifically to the hadith, or narratives purporting to detail the Prophet’s praxis, that contain some anti-women strictures on which Muslims routinely draw to argue against equality and in favor of male privilege.

Quite apart from the problems that arise from using the hadith to undercut or over-ride the Qur’an—and I’d be happy to speak about these in the Q&A if anyone is interested—the idea that God will something also presumes that only some of us can know for sure what God’s will is.

And this opens up the problem of interpretation that I referred to earlier: put simply, whose reading should we believe? Isn’t it just a matter of personal or communal preference?

I approach this question both methodologically and epistemologically and my view is that one can have it both ways: one can defend interpretive and textual polysemy without relinquishing the idea that it is possible, and even necessary, to judge between the con/textual legitimacy of different readings.

Indeed, this is what the Qur’an itself asks us to do. Not only that, but by laying down the principles for reading it, the Qur’an also provides us the principles for reading it in better and worse ways.

So here I will change focus and speak about the Qur’an’s auto-hermeneutics, as I like to call it.

Reading the Qur’an by the Qur’an

The Qur’an is unique in that it anticipates its own misreadings and also gives us some guidelines for reading it in contextually appropriate ways.

I want to share these guidelines with you by quoting directly from the Qur'an:

For instance, it condemns those who read it piecemeal and in a selective and decontextualized way. Referring to the Law given to Moses, it says "ye make it into (Separate) sheets for show, While ye conceal much (Of its contents)" (6:91; in Ali, 316).

It also criticizes "those who divided (Scripture into arbitrary parts), . . . and have made the Qur'an Into shreds (as they please)," warning that God "will, of a surety, Call them to account For all their deeds" (15: 90-93; in Ali, 653).

The Qur'an also disapproves of those who "change the words from their (right) times And places" (5:44; in Ali, 255), thereby reframing the meaning of scriptures and it is equally sharp in criticizing those who dwell only on its allegorical verses as a means to sow discord among people while ignoring its clear verses.

Most importantly for my purposes, the Qur'an asks us to read for its "best meanings," which it leaves to us to determine.

The reason I find this verse so momentous is that it establishes quite clearly that we can read the Qur'an in more than one way but also that not all the readings are therefore equally good.

Arguably, readings that ignore the principles I have just mentioned—such as that of textual holism, for instance—cannot qualify as good readings.

It is true that the Qur'an does not define the content of "better readings," but I think this is wonderful because it leaves the room open for human agency and choice and, indirectly, it also suggests the need to live in societies where it is possible to exercise this agency and choice.

This is the one of the grounds on which I argue against repression in Muslim societies because it is impossible to have a free dialogue on religious matters in closed and authoritarian societies and communities.

In addition, the Qur'an also provides us some theological doctrines for reading it and, to me, these are absolutely crucial because, after all, the Qur'an is God's speech and we cannot understand it independently of how we conceive of God.

What the Qur'an has to say about God—or divine ontology—is truly instructive and I have time to give you just one example.

A defining feature of God in the Qur'an is that God is Just and that divine justice lies in never does any zulm to people, zulm here meaning injustice resulting from transgressing against another person's rights (Izutsu).

But if God cannot do zulm, the Qur'an also cannot teach zulm. Of course, we are not all agreed on the meaning of zulm, but one of my claims is that patriarchy is a manifest case of zulm since it is predicated on transgressing against women's rights. And inasmuch as this is so, I don't believe the Qur'an can condone it.

This is of course an oversimplified summary of a more complex argument and my point is simply to illustrate that we can find hermeneutic keys to read the Qur'an in an antipatriarchal mode in the very nature of divine self-disclosure.

### The Qur'an and patriarchy

Indeed, it is not just God's self-disclosure that militates against reading the Qur'an as a patriarchal text, but also a wide array of its teachings.

Before I talk about these, I want to clarify that I treat patriarchy as a continuum at one end of which are misrepresentations of God as Father and of fathers as rulers over wives and children, and at the other end, the notion of sexual differentiation which is used to privilege males while Otherizing women.

The virtue of this definition is that it can be applied both to old and new, religious and secular, forms of male privilege and domination.

If one applies this definition to read the Qur'an, one finds no support for patriarchy in its teachings and much that allows us to challenge it.

For instance, the Qur'an does not represent God as Father or male and in fact explicitly forbids sacralizing God as Father or even using similitude for God.

Nor does it sacralize fathers or fatherhood. The Qur'an does however recognize that patriarchy has existed for a long time and that in actually existing patriarchy men, not women, are the locus of authority.

It is also true that the Qur'an frequently addresses these men, but addressing men is not the same as condoning or advocating patriarchy and male privilege. Indeed, the Qur'an repeatedly says that "following the ways of the father" has prevented people from the path of God.

My reading of the Qur'anic accounts of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad also suggests an inherent conflict between monotheism and patriarchy inasmuch

as patriarchies sacralize men and their authority over women and children, while monotheism sacralizes only God, and a God beyond sex/ gender at that.

Contrary to what many Muslims claim, 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. Rather, it designates women and men each other's "guides" (awliya) and establishes love and mutuality as the basis of marriage.

Moreover, as Riffat Hassan, among others, points out, in Islam sexual equality is ontological in that the Qur'an teaches that God created humans from a single self (nafs).

It does not privilege the male 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.' (Murata).

Thus there is no narrative in the Qur'an that suggests that men and women are opposites or portrays women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition of Westernized misogyny.

Indeed, the Qur'an does not even associate sex with gender. That is to say, while it recognizes sexual (biological) differences, it does not assign them any gender symbolism making it difficult to derive a theory of gender inequality from its teachings.

The Qur'an also does not link women and men to a specific division of labor (i.e., to specific gender roles). There is not a single verse that defines men's gender roles as a function of their biology, or suggests that biological differences between men and women make them unequal.

Now it is true that the Qur'an treats women and men differently with respect to such issues as marriage and divorce, but this doesn't mean that it establishes them as unequal.

For one thing, difference in itself does not imply inequality and for another, the Qur'an does not tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about biological superiority or inferiority.

The Qur'an's position on sexuality also is revolutionary in that it teaches that women and men have the same sexual natures and it does not ascribe a particular type of behavior, drive, or identity to either sex.

Further, the Qur'an acknowledges the importance of sexual desire and the need for its fulfillment, albeit within the framework of a moral sexual praxis whose standards are virtually identical for men and women.

The only basis on which Islam does distinguish between human beings is on the basis of their moral praxis. As Sachiko Murata says "in all the perspectives of Islamic life and thought people are separated into groups according to the degree to which they fulfill the purpose of life," as believers or non-believers.

At this point in my argument, it seems appropriate to address a question I'm often asked: if my reading is more in the spirit of the Qur'an than the dominant readings, why have Muslims historically not read the Qur'an as I do?

Muslim history and the Qur'an

To me, this question opens up complex issues having to do with hermeneutics and history and I obviously don't have the time to do justice to these issues.

But I do want to make a couple of brief points.

How Muslims have read the Qur'an has had to do with the nature of sexual/textual politics in Muslim societies, as well as with the role of Muslim states and interpretive communities in legitimizing only certain readings of Islam, as Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi, among others, have argued.

It has also had to do with Muslim intellectual history, in particular with how Muslims came to define religious epistemology and methodology.

In other words, we need to historicize and contextualize the production of religious knowledge in Muslim societies and to see it as emerging from the interplay of politics, economics, culture, society, and history.

In our own times, one of the reasons that the Qur'an remains closed to new methods of reading and therefore to new readings is that many Muslim states are repressive and anti-democratic.

But, unlike those who ascribe this repression to "Islam," I view it as resulting from the same complex mix of social, political, and economic factors including, in part, the history of Western colonialism and continuing neo-colonialism.

This has been a long talk, so I will now conclude by reading from the postscript of my book.

## Conclusion

I've selected these passages because I want to talk about a problem I encounter repeatedly: an anxiety on the part of both Muslims and non-Muslims about the fact that the Qur'an leaves room open for ambiguities that allows many Muslims to oppress women and some to wage terrorist wars against the West.

The question I want to consider is not just one of ambiguity, however, but also of responsibility. Essentially, is the Qur'an itself responsible for how we read it, or does the responsibility lie with us?

If, for the sake of argument, we were to hold the Qur'an responsible for its misreadings—on the grounds, for instance, that it uses allegory (even though it states that allegorical and clear verses must be read in conjunction), or because it uses words that have multiple meanings (even though it asks us to look for the best meanings), or because it sanctions certain practices that can lead to abuse . . .—what would that say about our own role in interpretation?

What would that mean for a theory of our own moral responsibility to read for the best meanings? To what extent would a theory of textual responsibility (one that places the onus of misreading on the text itself) absolve us of the moral and ethical responsibility to do what is right?

Could we have a hermeneutics, much less a hermeneutic spiral, if we assumed that meaning emerges from the encounter between human and textual subjects, but that the burden of misreading lies on the text alone?

Moreover, if "we always read the texts 'out of' a praxis and 'into' a praxis,"<sup>1</sup> are we not accountable for the praxes out of which, and into, which we read? Is it also not true that "we can have perfectly orthodox understandings of what Scripture is about and yet use these texts in the most perverse and sinful ways?"<sup>2</sup>

Is the problematic of reading just a textual-interpretive one, then, or also an ethical-moral one?

My own view is that morality is not the absence of evil, or of ambiguity, or of temptation; it is the willingness to choose what is right in the face of ambiguity

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<sup>1</sup> Miguez-Bonino, "Marxist Critical Tools: Are they Helpful in Breaking the Stranglehold of Idealist Hermeneutics?" in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> James J. Buckley, "The Hermeneutical Deadlock between Revelationalists, Textualists, and Functionalists," Modern Theology, Vol. 6, No. 4, July, 1990, p. 331.

and temptation and evil in the interest of leading a morally purposive life as individuals and as communities.

The Qur'an's concern with interpretive accuracy stems from its expectation that people will act upon their readings in order to lead such lives; i.e., the hermeneutic and the existential are therefore necessarily connected.

However, we can only live in responsible and ethical ways if we also read ethically and responsibly; and, we can only read responsibly and ethically if we (want to) live morally purposive lives.

As such, hermeneutic choices are always also moral and ethical choices.

A theory of textual responsibility, however, would free us from even having to make such choices, and to that extent, it would undercut views of humans as deliberative and morally reflexive agents, able to choose right over wrong."

That is from the book and to it I would add only that it is the ability to make this choice that ultimately defines what sorts of Muslims and humans we want to be.