Re-engaging Islam: a double challenge

Asma Barlas
Commemorative Lecture, Lisbon, Portugal, 22 June 2008

President of the Republic of Portugal and Mrs. Cavaco Silva, President of the Islamic Community of Lisbon and Mrs. Abdool Magid Vakil, and distinguished guests from all the communities gathered here: asalam alaikum and good morning. I am honored to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the CIL with you and to deliver the commemorative lecture on this occasion.

As an outsider to your country and community, I obviously do not know enough about the particular challenges you may be facing as Portuguese Muslims to be able to speak about these. However, as a Muslim who was born on one side of that imaginary line we like to draw between the East and West and who now lives on the other side of it, I can speak about some general challenges we face wherever we happen to live. I call this line "imaginary" not because there are no real political, economic, or ideological divides between the so-called East and West but because, as Muslims, we are taught that God is the sustainer of both the East and West and wherever we look, we can find the divine countenance.

Given constraints of time, I will focus on only two of the most urgent problems for Muslims as I see them. One is internal to our communities and requires a self-critique; this is the absence of sexual equality and a history of discrimination against women. The other has to do with the Western societies in which we live and necessitates an external critique; this is the equally old Western fear of Islam and Muslims and a history of impugning them. I will speak about each in turn, and if the criticisms are difficult to hear, they are nonetheless necessary if we want to deepen and clarify our commitments to both ourselves and others.

I. The internal critique: failure of ethics

The problem of sexual inequality and oppression among Muslims stems from a combination of factors, some religious and others not. Among the latter are the entrenched structures of patriarchy that privilege men and cultural practices that are frequently misogynistic. Among the former is how Muslims create religious knowledge, in particular, how they interpret Islam's scripture, the Qur'an. What is significant in this context is not just that women are formally excluded from this process but also that most Muslims read inequality and even oppression into the Qur'an itself. They do this in various ways that I cannot discuss here but, as I have argued elsewhere, we can and *should* contest anti-women readings of the Qur'an since they also undermine our concept of a just God who is uncreated, hence neither male nor female and therefore also above sexual partisanship.

I have also tried to illustrate the liberatory and anti-patriarchal possibilities of the Qur'an by reading it in light of certain Qur'anic principles, such as reading it for best meanings and as a whole rather than piecemeal or in a decontextualized way. However, works like mine remain unknown to most Muslims and even those who know it are often suspicious and critical because of their view that the Qur'an is an intrinsically patriarchal text. Prejudices, of course, cannot exist outside the structures and conventions of history and culture, law and tradition, sexual politics and religious authority, which is why one must look at all of these in order to understand personal biases. While I cannot offer an analysis of this scope, I do want to explain how religious knowledge discriminates against women as a way also of exploring some possible solutions.

The key factor in this context is Qur'an interpretation, or exegesis. Even though not all early scholars read the Qur'an in the same way, patriarchal readings of it nonetheless became hegemonic from the Abbasid period onwards. Fourteen centuries later, we still accept these readings unquestioningly both because they were handed down to us by tradition and because most scholars insist that the Qur'an's meanings are fixed. However, no text can have only one meaning since language itself is not fixed or transparent. If it were, the Qur'an would not open up ethical dilemmas for us by asking us to look for its best meanings. Here I should say that while we can differ in our understanding of best, I believe such meanings cannot be patriarchal since, in Islam, God is not a patriarch and there is thus no reason to assume that God's speech is patriarchal. Of course, such an argument assumes that God and God's speech are of a unity.

Another aspect of religious knowledge that discriminates against women is law, or *fiqh,* and it does this by transforming biological differences between men and women into socially-constructed gender hierarchies and inequalities. All the jurisprudential schools (four in Sunni and one in Shii Islam) take for granted not only that women and men are different, but that they are also unequal and they express this inequality in the "two-for-one formula" as Amina Wadud calls it. For instance, a woman's testimony, as well as her share in inheritance, is always regarded to be half that of a man's and the reasoning is that the woman, being a woman, is deficient in reasoning and inferior to a man. However, the Qur'an never makes such claims *even* in those instances where it treats women and men differently. Then, too, there are other cases of evidence-giving and inheritance in which the Qur'an privileges women. For instance, if a man accuses his wife of adultery on his own witness, the wife can refute his charge on her own witness and her word is, legally, the last. Then, too, while a brother does inherit twice the share of his sister from their deceased parent's property, a mother inherits twice the share of a father from their deceased child's property. I give these examples simply to show the travesties that result in law when we interpret the Qur'an with only some of its teachings in mind instead of reading it as a whole.

In spite of such problems, however, Muslims everywhere are convinced that we cannot question or change the law since its source, the Sharia, is immutable, and they define the Sharia as including both the Qur'an and the Sunnah, or practice, of the Prophet. However, one can question this position on three grounds. First, the fact that the Sharia is immutable does not mean that we cannot interpret it in more than one way. If that were the case, we would have one and not five legal schools in Islam. The fact is that no idea or knowledge can come to us without being mediated by our reason and intellect, or *aql* and *ilm,* in the Qur'an's terms. This is no less true of Qur'anic exegesis than it is of *fiqh* or Sharia. And since humans are not infallible and all-knowing, our interpretations and knowledge at any given time can also only be partial and historically contingent, not absolute.

Second, putting the Sunnah on the same level as the Qur'an by treating it as a revealed text is theologically unsound since the Qur'an is the word of God and the Sunnah comes to us by way of narratives, or hadith, that were compiled by scholars over the course of several centuries after the death of the Prophet. As such using the Sunnah to interpret the Qur'an has the effect of reversing the sources of textual authority in Islam which gives rise to several complications.

A third and related problem is that many hadith ascribe appalling misogyny to the Prophet and some even put him and God on opposite sides of an issue, which makes for a truly bad theology. A case in point is verse 4:34 which is read as a command to beat a disobedient wife. According to a hadith, when this verse was revealed to the Prophet, he said that he had wanted one thing (not to hit a woman) and God another. In effect, this hadith fixes the meaning of 4:34 by ascribing beating to God's will. However, we also know from the hadith that the Prophet never hit a woman and also admonished other men against doing so. One could interpret his refusal as a sign that he may not have read 4:34 as a command to hit a wife but most Muslims would rather continue reading 4:34 as the "beating verse" even if it means accepting disjunctures between God and the Prophet and even if it means ignoring the rest of the Qur'an's teachings that counsel love, kindness, mutuality, and *sukun* in a marriage. In fact, the Qur'an even instructs those men whose wives are their enemies to forgive them and treat them kindly. It thus seems reasonable to argue that we should look for better meanings of the word that is translated as "beat" specially when the Qur'an itself uses it in seventeen different ways.

This is, of course, a very simplified and broad summary and I offer it to make a larger point: that religious knowledge discriminates against women by reducing them to their biology, in other words, by treating sexual identity and differences as the yardstick of human worth and legal entitlements. I now want to suggest that Muslim notions of the common good discriminate against women by doing the opposite: refusing to acknowledge their sexual specificity by treating sexual identity and differences as irrelevant. Thus, mainstream notions of the common

good take the man to be normative and simply assume that men's and women's interests are and will be identical. Here women as women disappear from view. However, a common good is no longer common when it universalizes men and their interests while subsuming the particular needs of women in these interests.

What this suggests is that we cannot arrive at ethically viable interpretations of the Qur'an, law, or the common good either by ignoring the sexual specificity of women and men or, conversely, by confusing sexual differences with gender inequalities. Rather, we need to think more carefully about sexual difference and sameness and the notion of equality itself than we are accustomed to doing. Here, the Qur'an offers a template for thinking about such issues by teaching that we were all created from the same self *(nafs),* and made into male and female and nations and tribes so that we could learn to know one another. While the Qur'an makes some allowances for the fact that females and males are different, it also makes it clear that both were endowed with the same capacity for moral individuality in their role as God's vice-regents *(khilafah)*, on earth and as each other's moral guides *(awliya),* who have a mutual obligation to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong. Thus, from a Qur'anic perspective, while sexual equality is ontological (it is an aspect of our very being), it has to be nurtured by an ethics of mutuality based in a recognition of, and respect for, differences. Muslims could very well draw on these notions of *khilafa, awliya,* and *insan* to develop a fuller notion of being human as well as a theory and practice of sexual equality.

To do this, we will need to re-think religious knowledge and here again, I can only gesture to the challenges involved in doing so. The first is to open up the Qur'an to multiple readings. This is hard to do as long as only a handful of experts, all male and mostly Arab, claim to know what God really means. The Qur'an, however, came for all of humanity and humanity, as we know, comprises not just men but women, not just scholars but lay-people, not just the educated but the unlettered, not just Arabs but non-Arabs, not just born Muslims but converts, and not just Muslims but non-Muslims. The Qur'an recognizes that some people will have knowledge of religion and others will not, that some will read the Qur'an itself badly and others will struggle to find its best meanings. Yet, it still asks us to use our *aql* and *ilm*, our reason and knowledge, to decipher its ayat: signs of God, that are both on the horizon and within ourselves. In other words, the Qur'an itself gives us the right and authority to interpret it. Not all of us will want to do so or have the skills for it; however, this is not an argument for wanting to centralize religious knowledge or to privatize the Qur'an.

A second and related challenge is to press for new formulations of law and a willingness to re-examine all those hadith that, no matter how "scientific," are derogatory to our idea of a just God or to the Prophet. And, lastly, we need to struggle for a definition of the common good that truly is common in that both women and men will have a say in its articulation. I am not suggesting that any

of this will be easy, but, until we are ready to confront these challenges, Muslim societies will remain morally fractured, unable to provide a space within which we can actualize the full potential of our humanity as the Qur'an describes it.

The external critique: failure of solidarity

In addition to these internal challenges, Western Muslims also have to confront pressures from outside their communities in the form of anti-Islamic prejudices. This is not to say that the relationship between "Islam and the West" is, or has been, one only of hostility and violence. There is also a rich and complex legacy of cultural exchanges between them, as in Muslim-Christian-Jewish Andalusia. However, few people today know much about this legacy and the very fact that we can continue to speak of "Islam and the West" shows that this oppositional positioning is deeply embedded in our histories and collective psyches.

Like sexual discrimination in Muslim societies, discrimination against Muslims is also the result of many factors and here I can focus on only one.[1] This has to do with how the West has tried to make sense of Islam historically. My view is that the ideological template it has used to understand Islam impedes thinking about Islam in morally relevant ways and thus also feeling solidarity with Muslims. It does this in three ways: by framing differences as oppositions, by re-inscribing a long history of Western violence against Muslims as discrete and episodic thus masking its continuities, and by reframing many Western transgressions as acts of reverse violence by Muslims thus transforming Westerners into victims. And even though this template originated in Europe's medieval Christian past, it is still the primary ideological grid through which secular Westerners continue to confront Islam. These are obviously large claims to substantiate in a brief lecture but I have considered them at length elsewhere and here I will give one example.

This pertains to the cartoon controversy revived recently by the re-publication of the cartoons depicting the Prophet as a terrorist. Surprisingly, many secular Europeans feigned surprise that Muslims would be so insulted by such images that some would respond to it with violence. I say "feigned" because it was just this reaction on which many people had banked to confirm their view that Muslims lack a sense of humor and appreciation for tolerance and freedom. The reactions of a few Muslims then became a way to portray not just the cartoonists but, the principle of free speech itself, as the victim of "Islamic" aggression.

Since much has already been said on the subject, I will content myself with three points. The first is that egregious images of the Prophet also date from medieval times and have an older historical pedigree than free speech; in other words,

---

[1] This section draws on my second Spinoza lecture, "Would Spinoza Understand Me? Europe, Islam and the Mirror of Difference," delivered in Amsterdam on June 5, 2008 and currently in press. This is not to be quoted.

such images were never contingent on the idea or practice of freedom. The cartoons are merely the latest in this series of images and need to be looked at within the context of a larger historical narrative than arguments about free speech allow. Although this narrative also includes some salutary images, the Prophet's depictions have generally served as a foil for establishing European piety, innocence, reasonableness, and most recently, victimization.

To medieval Christians he was the Antichrist, a heathen idol, the devil, Mahound (as also in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses)*, and an imposter; he appears in all these guises from the Crusades up to the Reformation. His depiction as an imposter during this period reaches its literary apotheosis in Dante, securing for him a place in the eighth circle of hell. Two centuries later, he appears as an Antichrist in Luther's work who mentions him two dozen times in a single book, "all in the form of demonization."[2] Over a century later, the famous Dutch jurist, Grotius, declares him a thief. Contrasting him to Jesus, Grotius writes "Jesus led an innocent life, against which no objection can be made. Mahomet was a long time a robber." Not satisfied with affirming Jesus' innocence, Grotius goes on to declare that *all* Christians are innocent. They "who embraced the law of Christ, [he says] were men who feared God, and led innocent lives . . . But they who first embraced Mahometanism were robbers, and men void of humanity and piety."[3] This view of Christian innocence follows Grotius' stern rebuke in the very same volume of Christians for their mutual hatred and bloodshed.

From the eighteenth century on, as the figure of the Antichrist began to lose its religious moorings, so did images of the Prophet. By the Enlightenment, his critics could assail him in the new language of secularism. To Voltaire, he was the "worst type of . . . fanatic," and to Diderot and Kant "the greatest enemy of reason who ever lived."[4] Even if these changing depictions say more about the changing European relationship to religion than they do about the Prophet, the point is that such "Classically inspired secular images" would endure over time, "surviving the vicissitudes of religious and antireligious sentiment in the early modern and modern eras."[5] The Danish cartoons clearly bear this out; they have simply put a contemporary political spin on medieval images of the Prophet so that he now appears as a terrorist rather than as the Antichrist; however in both these roles he occupies the same ideological location vis-à-vis the West. This is why framing the "cartoon controversy" simply as a free speech issue obscures and deflects attention from the cartoons' genealogy.

---

[2] Minou Reeves. *Muhammad in Europe*, New York University, 2000; p. 102.

[3] Hugo Grotius. The *Truth of the Christian Religion*, USA: Kessinger Publishing, no date; pp. 239-240.

[4] Reeves, p. 150.

[5] NancyBisaha. *Creating East and West*, University of Pennsylvania, 2004; p. 93.

However, even if one were simply to focus on issues of free speech, the fact is that speech lends itself not just to expressions of dissent and critique, but also to assertions of dominance and enactments of power. If "the exercise of power is inseparable from its display," then being able to represent power is "essential to re-producing domination." To borrow an example from the antebellum U.S. (the period of slavery), "domination depended upon demonstrations of the slave-holder's dominion and the captive's abasement."[6] Something similar seems to be at work in the West today where free speech allows Westerners to re-present and re-produce their cultural and intellectual dominion over Muslims by desecrating our sacred symbols. It is as much to this willful display of power as it is to the content of specific attacks that most Muslims react angrily and what we condemn is not free speech but its use to demean and discipline us. One can certainly defend domination in the name of freedom, but those oppressed by such a view or practice of freedom would say that not all freedoms are equal or equally worth defending. Such a critique, it should be obvious, rests on rejecting not freedom or toleration but the West's self-serving conceptions of both.

My last point is that since the cartoons are neither humorous and nor ironic (they are not amusing because terrorism is not funny, and they are not ironic because most Westerners believe that Muslims *are* in fact terrorists), one must look to other factors to explain their entertainment value and function. Here I borrow from Saidya Hartman who argues that organizing "innocent amusements and spectacles of mastery" is a way for the dominant classes "to establish their dominion."[7] In continuation of what I have just said about free speech, I believe that the cartoons are very much spectacles of mastery. At the same time, they also evoke and reinforce intra-Western solidarity against Muslims produced by images of suffering at the hands of a common enemy. After all, parodying the Prophet as a terrorist can only resonate with Europeans to the extent that they are invested in claiming events like September 11, 2001 as their own.

This is just one example and I do not mean to hold all of Western history hostage to it. As I said earlier, this history also contains tendencies towards solidarity with Muslims. However, such tendencies tend to be recessive which suggests that solidarity, too, is strained in the West. Although individual Westerners and Muslims can and do have meaningful relationships, personal goodwill cannot really be a substitute for communal care or concern.

The challenge for Muslims is to help enable this communal care and concern and this depends both on our willingness to speak about difficult issues and to seek allies across differences. In either case, we need to embrace our identities fully in order to be able to know both ourselves and others. Even if this is a challenge and even if you found it hard to listen to me or agree with me, I end on the hope

---

[6] Saidya Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection*, Oxford University Press, 1997; p. 7.
[7] Hartman, p. 8.

that you nonetheless believe in the need for mutual regard and recognition. The fact that we are here today, celebrating Muslims in Lisbon together suggests to me that perhaps you are already well along this path.