

Fundamentalism & Modernity: Robert L. Bernstein Symposium

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I'd like to thank Deena Hurwitz for inviting me to the Bernstein Symposium. Although it was at rather short notice, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to participate in this dialogue on fundamentalism and modernity for reasons that I hope will soon become clear.

I've been charged with responding to Margot Badran's presentation, which I had a chance to read in draft form a couple of days ago and of situating my own work on the Qur'an in the context of—and here I'd like to quote from Deena's email—“what it is about modernity that produces the interpretation of Islam that [you oppose in your book], that we see as rigidly fundamentalist, and how can we address gender rights in the context of this construct?”

I feel I can best do that if I begin by engaging the premises that are structuring the Symposium's proceedings, hence our conversation about fundamentalism and modernity. This will allow you to determine for yourselves where both Dr. Badran's work and mine fit into this debate.

The Symposium: modernity/fundamentalism

The Symposium's description says “While scholars have repeatedly warned against seeing the terrorist attack of last fall as a manifestation of a deep clash of civilizations between Islam and the West, it undeniably points to a clash between a fundamentalist strain of Islam and the modern West. Much inquiry lately has asked what it is about Islam that has produced this clash. The Bernstein Symposium will begin by posing the question the other way around: What is it about modernity that has produced a fundamentalist reaction?” By way of clarification, the narrative also points out that fundamentalism is not restricted to Islam and that it is “not the survival of an archaic form into modern times; rather, it is no less a part of modernity than the practices to which it responds.”

I quoted extensively from the description because I find it promising, and even daring—especially in these times of increased suspicion of Islam—in its stated desire to shift the grounds of the debate on the “civilizational clash” between Islam and the West. Earlier this week I argued in a paper on jihad that this notion of a clash, and the Islam/West binary in which it is based, is a relic of a “long-standing and willful politics of mis-recognition of Islam dating from medieval Europe's attempts to decipher it. This politics confuses Islam with Muslims, disregards the role of political, economic, cultural, and historical factors in shaping not only Muslim actions and attitudes, but also their interpretations of

Islam, and denies Western complicity in creating the conditions that are encouraging the growth of extremism, and not just on the part of some Muslims.”[1]

That is why I find the Symposium’s willingness to try and complicate our understanding of Islam and also of modernity so significant. Indeed, by aligning the West with modernity, the Symposium even opens up space to ask what it is about the modern West that has provoked such a sharp reaction to its policies. I consider this a promising move because it can lead us to acknowledge mutual responsibility for mutual violence, rather than simply pathologizing Islam and Muslims. I say “pathologizing” because when we lay the onus on Islam for the “civilizational clash” between itself and the West, we not only exonerate the West from any responsibility for this clash, but we also re-present Muslim violence as always already religious. We thus rule out the possibility that political or economic or other factors could be a source of Muslim discontent thus denying Muslims a political identity, voice, and agency.

I am of course aware that religion and politics intersect in deep and complex ways so that it is sometimes hard to disentangle them, but it is only with respect to Islam that people so readily collapse politics, culture, history, and economics into the catchall category of “religion,” without feeling the need to examine their interconnections. (I won’t comment on the error of contrasting a belief system with an “imagined geography,” to borrow Edward Said’s phrase, beyond pointing out that it is an egregious category mistake.)

Conversely, when we pose the question as the Symposium does, we open up different kinds of conceptual and conversational spaces that allow us to argue, for instance, that whereas in the West modernity brought the fruits of capitalism, industrialization, and representative democracy, for large segments of the world’s people—including Muslims—it brought colonization, slavery, economic underdevelopment, a militarization of politics, increasing poverty, and the dislocation and disappearance of indigenous peoples.

Similarly, the very secularism that freed “man”—in the masculinist language of the Enlightenment—from the tyranny of religion, also generated radical doubt as a pervasive epistemic stance. And while doubt can serve to inspire great achievements, it also can be felt as paralyzing and alienating and undermine people’s sense of themselves as purposive moral agents in the world. Hence what many may embrace as freedom, others may experience as a loss, which they then seek to alleviate in different ways.

These are the kinds of tensions that we need to debate if we are to explain the variations in people’s experiences of the world and in the world that lead to mutual suspicion and hostility rather than assuming, a priori, that an immutable and radical difference between civilizations predisposes one to clash endlessly with the other. (Here I cannot ignore the irony that when self-styled Muslim

jihadis want to take this view to its logical and deadly conclusion, we denounce them as fundamentalists and terrorists, but when the likes of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington espouse the same sort of apocryphal inevitablism, we laud them as discerning scholars!)

Having indicated the possibilities opened up by the Symposium's approach, I must also wonder at the wisdom of maintaining, as its starting premise, the idea that there is indeed a clash between Islam (albeit in its fundamentalist forms), and the West (in its modern incarnation). I wonder whether deleting the word "civilizational" from in front of "clash" and adding "fundamentalist" to Islam then shifts the grounds of the debate all that much after all inasmuch as it still localizes the problem as residing within Islam itself, even if it is a modern West that may have provoked it unwittingly into a re-action. Further, this Islam/fundamentalism vs. West/modernity binary not only undercuts the Symposium's own view that fundamentalism and modernity are imbricated, but it also locks us into the same oppositional and adversarial essentialisms that the Symposium wants us to avoid.

Margot Badran: Islamic Feminisms

It is from within this critique, that I wish to emphasize the significance of Margot Badran's discussion of Islamic feminisms. It is not only that she finds it difficult to talk meaningfully about Muslim women's struggle for sexual equality in terms of such binaries as modernity/fundamentalism and religion/secularism. It is also that, as her work shows, binarism as a mode of inquiry emphasizes differences to the exclusion of similarities, even as it privileges one half of the binary at the expense of the other.

Thus, the West/modernity/secularism become synonymous with sexual equality and women's rights and Islam/fundamentalism/religion becomes the locus of women's oppression. She challenges these alignments on the grounds both that they do not capture complex realities and also that they are never mutually exclusive. "The religious" may not always be "fundamentalist," and not all "fundamentalisms" are oppressive to women. Similarly, "the secular" need not always be progressive for women nor "the traditional" oppressive. Further, tradition may exist within the modern and "the modern" may also have existed in the past.

In this context, I am particularly fascinated by her argument about 'asriyya, which, she points out, implies a view of modernity based in the idea of simultaneity and coevalness. This has truly radical implications given that coevalness is precisely what the modernity/ fundamentalism binary denies by situating societies on "a temporal slope" for the purposes of establishing differences and hierarchies between them.

This is an insight from Johannes Fabian's[2] work on how anthropology creates its Other by using different notions of Time. As he argues, Typological Time "underlies such qualifications as preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial, and a host of permutations which include pairs such as tribal vs. feudal, rural vs. urban." It is through such uses of Time that not only have Western theories given meaning "to the distribution of humanity in space," but also distanced the West from "others." It thus becomes important to ask whose notion of time we are using when we speak about the past and the present, tradition and modernity. I believe Dr. Badran can advance this line of inquiry by continuing to develop her argument about 'asriyya.

It is not only by interrogating constructions of modernity and fundamentalism but also by documenting Muslim women's struggles in the Middle East, that Dr. Badran can expose the fallacy of believing that sex/gender equality is a Western, secular, artifact. As she says, sexual equality also is scripturally encoded in Islam and many Muslim women are engaged in the process of trying to recuperate it. Her documentation and interpretation of these processes is invaluable for allowing us to understand why Muslims believe that we can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur'an's teachings.

"Believing Women" in Islam [3]

I am one of those Muslims. But I must say straight off that I do not call myself a feminist; rather, I prefer the term "believing woman," which I borrow from the Qur'an. I say this not in order to challenge or refute Dr. Badran's argument about the complexity and multiplicity of Muslim women's identities, but as a way to illustrate it. Quite simply, I don't wish to qualify or constrain my sense of self as a Muslim woman with that label.

I should also admit that I do not believe that the patriarchal interpretations of Islam that I seek to contest are a function of modern strains of fundamentalism; such interpretations have been around for a long time. Conversely, some medieval Muslim male scholars have read the Qur'an in more egalitarian ways than many "modern" Muslims, including women, do.

My work basically attempts to show that the Qur'an not only does not advocate or sanction patriarchy, but that its teachings allow us to contest its foundational myths, whether we define patriarchy, in the traditional sense, as father's rule, or, in the modern sense, as a politics of gender inequality based in the idea of sexual differentiation.

My argument has both a historical and a hermeneutic aspect. The historical explains the canonicity of patriarchal readings of the Qur'an that were generated centuries ago but which most Muslims today continue to accept as legitimate. My claim is that these readings are a function of the method that Muslims have

applied to read the Qur'an and that, historically, this method was shaped by the nature and structure of both religious and political-secular authority in early Muslim societies.

The hermeneutic aspect of my argument consists of showing that the Qur'an does not re-present God as Father/male, or teach that God has a special relationship with males, or that men embody Divine attributes, or attributes that women do not, or 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, as religious and traditional patriarchies claim.

The Qur'an also does not advocate gender differentiation, dualisms, or inequalities on the basis of sexual (biological) differences between women and men; i.e., it does not privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males. Nor does it treat man as the Self (normative) and woman as the Other (deviant), or re-present women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do.

It may be the promise inherent in my work that leads many people to ask how I intend now to ensure a dialogue on women's rights in the "Muslim world," based on my views. I'm not sure I can, or even that I should be expected to. I do see the relative ease with which a decades long feminists' movement has been put on the defensive in the self-professedly secular and modern West and wonder if the challenge to maintain any kind of a dialogue across differences is not in fact universal and not simply a problem limited to Muslims.

I readily concede that liberatory readings of scripture, such as mine, will not help to bring about a change in women's status in Muslim societies. But, I think it is safe to say that no meaningful change can occur in these societies that does not draw its legitimacy from the Quran's teachings. And, since different readings of the Qur'an can yield what, for women, are "fundamentally different Islams," as Leila Ahmed[4] says, it becomes imperative to challenge authoritarian and patriarchal readings of Islam. To me, the first step in that process is to retrieve that "stubbornly egalitarian" voice of Islam to which Ahmed refers and which continues to guide Muslims like myself to read the best meanings into/from my scripture, as the Qur'an itself urges all believers to do.

[1] Asma Barlas, "Jihad=Holy War=Terrorism: The Politics of Conflation and Denial," presented at the conference on Pakistan: Islam and Civil Society at the Dawn of the 21st Century," American University, Washington, D.C., 8, 2002.

[2] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

[3] Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

[4] Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam: History Roots of a Modern Debate, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992