

## **Islam, Women, and Equality: Reading the Qur'an for Liberation**

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Thank you very much for coming tonight; actually, I was hard put to come myself given that we are about an hour away from the US attack on Iraq. But, this was planned a while back and so here I am.

I particularly want to acknowledge Howard Erlich, dean of H&S, for initially inviting me to share my work with the campus community, and Tanya Saunders, assistant provost, for making this event finally happen.

This is going to be part talk and part book-reading; I'm sure that won't be a problem for most of you since I'm assuming you haven't read the book. As for the few who have and who also have come to my other presentations, I'm sorry to put you through this but, unlike Monty Python, I find it difficult to keep coming up with something completely different every time!

The talk is divided into four parts. In the first, I discuss why I wrote the book and what it's about; in the next, I speak about some of the experiences that shaped my perspectives on Islam, in the third, I offer my reading of the Qur'an's position on sexual equality and patriarchy, and in the last, I discuss the issue of interpretation itself.

All this should take just over half an hour and then we can have a dialogue; and you are welcome to ask me about issues that I may not have talked about but in which you are interested. (I intend to put the talk on my website so anyone who wants to look up the citations can do so.)

### **Why I wrote about the Qur'an**

I started work on this book seven years ago, when not many people here were interested in Islam but for me this was a crucial project because of the pervasiveness of the view that Islam is "a religious patriarchy that 'professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality' and puts a 'sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience,'" [1] as many Muslims and feminists claim. (This, by the way, is the characterization of the Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Mernissi.)

My own experiences of Islam, however, have shown me that Muslims don't always practice what the Qur'an teaches and that we can and do read the Qur'an in more than one way. Indeed, what we read the Qur'an to be saying depends on who reads it, how, and in what specific circumstances since there is a relationship between authority and knowledge, texts and the extra-textual contexts of their reading, as well as between meaning, method, and gender

(though I don't believe that there's a fixed relationship between gender and reading).

These relationships seem obvious but it is still risky to make such an argument because it calls into question the legitimacy of accepted readings of the Qur'an and the processes by which religious knowledge, and a canon of sorts, was constructed historically.

Basically, the aim of my book is to recover the scriptural basis of sexual equality in Islam and thus, hopefully, to provide a compelling argument about why Islam is not a patriarchy and why Muslim women and men can struggle for equality from within an Islamic framework.

The book is organized around two sets of questions that I believe have "both theoretical significance and real-life consequences for Muslims, especially women: First, does [the Qur'an] teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression? Is it, as critics allege, a patriarchal and even sexist and misogynistic text? Intimately related to that question is the second: Does the Qur'an permit and encourage liberation for women?" [2]

I'm going to leave you in suspense for a while about what I mean by these questions and how I answer them because I'd now like to speak about some of my own experiences that allowed me to engage Islam in this way.

### **Engaging Islam: my perspective**

My interest in studying Islam grew out of experiences in Pakistan, which is my home country and where I lived until 1983, and in the US where I've spent the last twenty years of my life.

It's easy to assume that the prevailing culture in Pakistan is Islamic because 98% of the people are Muslims and it wasn't until I no longer was embedded in that culture that I came to realize how much of what passes as Islam actually ignores or violates the Qur'an's teachings. (The reason I use the Qur'an as a yardstick to evaluate Muslim practices is because I believe that a scripture offers the most authoritative and compelling exposition of a religion.)

Though we're Muslims, my own family wasn't "Islamic" in a traditional sense either. Both my parents, as well as all my siblings and I, attended Catholic convents and graduated from colleges run by missionaries. So intellectually, if not socially, we are the products of a thoroughly Westernized education that extends to speaking English as our first language. (I make this distinction because Westernization for us never meant drinking alcohol, or dating, or wearing other clothes than our "native costumes," as many people here are fond of calling them.)

However, my parents did ensure that I was taught to read the Qur'an in Arabic at an early age but, unfortunately, since I wasn't taught Arabic, I didn't know what I was reading (this was also true of my siblings and I think most people). Eventually, of course, I read the Qur'an in English and also began to learn Arabic, as some other family members also are doing, or have done.

This upbringing disadvantaged me in some ways, by making me an outsider in my own culture, but it also benefited me in that my introduction to Islam was through the Qur'an rather than through the secondary religious texts or accounts of Arab or Muslim history. This is important because the sexism and misogyny that are associated with Islam arise mostly in these nonQur'anic sources. I was therefore able to read the Qur'an unencumbered by this aspect of religious tradition and history. And, by the time I did come to study them, I was rooted firmly in the Qur'an's teachings, which became the intellectual and theological prism through which this engagement occurred.

I also was free to read the Qur'an in different translations because no one insisted that I adhere to only one translation or interpretation. I was therefore able to see early on that scholars differed in how they translated or interpreted the Qur'an, specially on issues having to do with women.

Finally, living in Pakistan also allowed me to see the gap between the Qur'an's teachings and Muslim practices when a military general, who had come to power through a coup in 1979, launched a program of "Islamization" that meant introducing Muslim law (Sharia) piecemeal into the country. The Sharia, unfortunately, legalizes sexual inequality by equating the testimony of two women to that of one man and it also fails to distinguish between rape, adultery, and extramarital sex, for all of which it prescribes stoning to death, something that the Qur'an itself does not sanction for any crime in any context.

Such laws naturally had devastating consequences for women. One particularly notorious case involved the rape of a blind woman who became pregnant. The court took this as evidence that she was guilty of extramarital sex and sentenced her to be stoned, though the sentence was later stayed. Meanwhile, the rapist went free because, being blind, she couldn't identify him. However, even if she had been able to see him, the court would still have discounted her testimony because it wasn't corroborated by another woman.

This, however, is a gross misreading of the Qur'an since in only one out of several instances of evidence-giving does the Qur'an say that two women can serve as witnesses to a financial transaction if a man is not available. In the other cases, it does not distinguish between women's and men's testimonies and in the case of adultery, it privileges the woman's testimony. If a man accuses his wife of adultery and cannot produce four male witnesses to corroborate his testimony, the Qur'an allows the wife to be her own witness; if she swears her innocence, it gives her husband no further legal recourse against her. But the Sharia clearly

does not see the Qur'anic privilege given to women in this instance as proof that women's evidence isn't automatically half that of a man's. So, even before I left Pakistan, I had become aware of the "striking difference between what can be safely inferred from the Qur'an itself and what has frequently been read into it." [3]

This realization grew in the US where people ascribe all sorts of stuff to Islam that either has nothing to do with it or isn't Islamic in its particular manifestations, such as the harem, the veil, and female circumcision and, after 9/11, the concept of holy war. There is, however, no concept of holy war or of female circumcision in the Qur'an, and the forms of polygyny that most Muslims practice violate the Qur'anic provisions on marriage, as do many forms of veiling. And, yet, this sense of Islam as bizarre and deviant is so pervasive that it's hard to make much of a dent in people's perceptions. And, of course, after 9/11 this sense has grown exponentially. As I told another audience recently [4], Muslims now are permanently positioned between being the antichrist and anti-Semites, and the onus is on us to prove otherwise.

Although things have been quite civil on our own campus, some of you may recall that at a panel at which I and some Muslim colleagues spoke a couple of years ago, some people got very upset with us when we refused to speak on behalf of the hijackers and to condemn Islam as inherently violent. Soon afterwards, a professor-who routinely forwards me the most insulting stuff she can find on Islam in the media-called me, wanting to know if I thought terrorists would strike during Ramadan because she wanted to make some investment decisions about her stocks and bonds!

As you can imagine, it is difficult to exist "normally" in such circumstances even if I have more legal rights and personal freedoms here than I did in Pakistan. In fact, with the two Patriot Acts rolling back the legal rights and civil liberties of Muslims, I'm not sure what "freedom" for Muslims in the US really means today.

But, looking at the brighter side: as Conan the Barbarian-anticipating Nietzsche-tells us, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger and I have not only developed more resilience, but also a more critical awareness of my religion and myself and my book has grown out of this awareness.

### **"Believing Women"**

Earlier, I shared with you the two sets of questions that I raise in the book and I now will clarify what I mean by them and how I answer them.

"When I ask whether the Qur'an is a patriarchal or misogynistic text, I am asking whether it represents God as Father/male or teaches that God has a special relationship with males or that males embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful. Further, does it teach that rule by the

father/husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule, as religious and traditional patriarchies claim?

Alternatively, does the Qur'an advocate gender differentiation, dualisms, or inequality on the basis of sexual (biological) differences between women and men? In other words, does it privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treat man as the Self (normative) and woman as the Other, or view women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do?

When I ask whether we can read the Qur'an for liberation, I am asking whether its teachings about God as well as about human creation, ontology, sexuality, and marital relationships challenge sexual inequality and patriarchy. Alternatively, do the teachings of the Qur'an allow us to theorize the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men?" [5]

As is obvious, these questions presuppose a particular view of patriarchy and in passing I should mention that no one until now had applied a definition of patriarchy to read the Qur'an even though, as I noted earlier, many Muslims regularly condemn Islam as a patriarchal religion.

"I define patriarchy in both a narrow (specific) and a broad (universal) sense in order to make the definition as comprehensive as possible. Narrowly defined, patriarchy is a historically specific mode of rule by fathers that, in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real as well as symbolic continuum between the 'Father/ fathers,' that is, between a patriarchalized view of God as Father/male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband's claim to rule over his wife and children. I apply this definition in reading the Qur'an because the Qur'an was revealed in the context of a traditional patriarchy, and my aim is to see if it endorsed this mode of patriarchy by representing God as Father or by representing the father or husband as ruler over his wife and children.

[However, since] the Qur'an's teachings are universal and since father's rule has reconstituted itself, I also define patriarchy more broadly, as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by 'transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other.'" [6] I have borrowed this definition from my colleague, Zillah Eisenstein; in her later work, she does clarify that difference doesn't mean inequality, which is a crucial point to which I will return.

Using this definition, I show that it is possible "to answer the first set of questions- is the Qur'an a patriarchal or misogynistic text-in the negative, while [answering...] the second-can the Qur'an be a source for women's liberation-in the affirmative." [7]

To begin with, the Qur'an does not represent God as Father or male; indeed, it

explicitly forbids sacralizing God as Father or using similitude for God. Nor does it sacralize fathers or fatherhood. It does recognize that in historically existing patriarchies, men are the locus of authority and it does address patriarchies, but addressing a patriarchy is not the same as condoning or advocating one and 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 the latter sacralizes men and their authority over women and children, which the Qur'an does not do.

Thus, contrary to what many Muslims claim, the Qur'an 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, 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 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.' [8]

The Qur'an also does not define men and women as opposites, or portray women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal. In fact, it does not even associate sex with gender; thus, while the Qur'an recognizes sexual/biological differences, it does not assign them any gender symbolism making it difficult to derive a theory of sexual and 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 suggests that men's gender roles are a function of their biology, or that biological differences between men and women make them unequal. Therefore, while the Qur'an does treat women and men differently with respect to such issues as marriage and divorce, this doesn't mean that it establishes them as unequal. For one thing, difference in itself does not imply inequality. 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; in other words, 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 [9] says it "distinguishes

between those who have faith and those who do not: the 'believers' and the 'unbelievers.' 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.” [10]

Even though this extensive reading establishes the Qur'an's opposition to patriarchy and its support for sexual equality, it is not just on this basis that I describe the Qur'an as antipatriarchal but also on the basis of specific theological claims. Indeed, I believe that the antipatriarchal nature of Qur'anic epistemology flows from Islamic conceptualizations of God.

This part of my argument runs as follows: since there is an intrinsic relationship between divine ontology and divine discourse, we need to connect God's speech to God, and we also need to embrace a sound theological understanding of God, or, rather of divine self-disclosure (by which I mean how God describes God since that is the only way humans can know God). To put it differently, since a scripture “is experienced within the context of a distinctive image of, and relationship to God, whose speech it is . . . the best way to generate contextually appropriate readings of it ...[is to make] God's self-disclosure the hermeneutic site from which to read the Qur'an.”

I use this methodology to analyze the hermeneutic implications of three aspects of God's Self-disclosure for reading the Qur'an and I'd like to summarize these briefly and simply.

The first is the doctrine of Tawhid which teaches the principle of Divine Unity: God is one and God's sovereignty is indivisible. To my mind, this means 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.” [11]

Secondly, the Qur'an teaches that God is Just and that divine justice lies in never doing zulm to people (zulm, in the Qur'anic context, means transgressing against another's rights). 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 oppressing them, I argue that the Qur'an cannot possibly endorse them and we should read its provisions with this idea in mind.

Third, the Qur'an teaches that God is beyond sex/gender and is unrepresentable; as such, we should view masculinist references to God (as “He”) as bad linguistic conventions and not as accurate statements about the nature of divine being.

I should also mention that the methodological criteria I use to read the Qur'an I derive from the Qur'an itself, such as reading it for its best meanings, reading it as a thematic and hermeneutic unity rather than piecemeal, selectively, or in a

decontextualized way, and privileging its clear verses over its allegorical.

Applying all these criteria to read the Qur'an yields a quite different interpretation of it than the dominant ones and confirms that not only is Islam not a religious patriarchy but that it advocates a rather radical view of sexual equality.

Of course, if this reading is correct, the question becomes why haven't Muslims read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal and liberatory text? I want to address this problem, as well as the larger issue of interpretation, in the last part of my talk.

### **Interpreting Islam**

I believe that the reason Muslims have failed to read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal text has to do with "who has read it (basically men), the contexts in which they have read it (basically patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it (basically one that ignores the hermeneutic and theological principles that the Qur'an suggests for its own reading)." [12]

Much of the religious knowledge Muslims regard as canonical today is the product of a method that has been described as linear, atomistic, and hermeneutically flawed. However, because of how religious knowledge and authority came to be structured in Muslim societies historically, most Muslims continue to regard these interpretations and this methodology as Islamic.

Much of this religious knowledge also was produced by male scholars in the first few centuries of Islam which were coterminous with the medieval period of European history. Even though Muslim civilization was at its zenith during this period of European decline, this was nonetheless an era of enormous misogyny that was cross-cultural and inter-national in its scope.

Added to this is the fact that many of the Qur'an's provisions threatened existing relationships of power between women and men and between the rulers and the ruled and produced a strong conservative resistance that extended to de-radicalizing parts of its message very early on.

For instance, Mernissi [13] has shown how many men tried to misread the verses that extended certain inalienable rights to women. Similarly, Louise Marlow argues that as early as the second/eighth century, Muslim intellectuals (ulema) had begun to dilute "the egalitarian impulse in various parts of tradition," for instance, by justifying hierarchical "'models of kingship' in a society whose Scripture extolled the virtues of egalitarianism. [14]

Thus, the ulama who had 'gained incontestable possession of the moral high ground' ...refused to 'translate the antihierarchical and antiauthoritarian moral at the heart of their scholarly tradition into an active social and political opposition' (116). Instead, they sought to justify not only hierarchies, but quietism as well,

even though some of them ‘felt obliged to defend their quietism, since it was activism that had been suggested most strongly by early Muslim experience.’ By the third/ninth century, even Quranic exegesis showed that the egalitarianism once associated with the Quran had lost its ‘subversive connotation.’” [15]

On its part, the early Muslim state also became involved in promoting certain interpretive practices and certain readings of Islam that were oppressive to women. This has been documented by several people, including Leila Ahmed [16], who also points out that different readings of the same texts yield “fundamentally different Islams” for women. (I think we saw the truth of that statement quite graphically in how the Taliban chose to interpret Islam.)

All this suggests, of course, that hermeneutical and existential questions are connected and to the extent they are, it is reasonable to argue that one cannot read scriptures in liberatory modes by means of flawed methodologies and in oppressive and antidemocratic circumstances.

Many people, including disillusioned Muslims, believe that Islam itself is antidemocratic, but I reject such essentialism because, as my own work shows, a religion is always polysemic (has a multiplicity of meanings) and we can read it in more than one way. To me, then, the more appropriate question becomes “why does a community come to regard certain interpretations and ideas as authentic, authoritative, or canonical?” And that takes us back to such issues as how knowledge itself is produced and the contexts in which it is produced.

If we look at Muslim societies today, we find a rather dismal picture. Most of the regimes in power are viewed by their own people as “illegitimate, oppressive, and unIslamic. Moreover, as a result partly of Western support of such regimes and partly of the legacy of Western colonialism, ‘Muslim societies have experienced modernization not as economic development or political freedoms, but as a ‘coercive secularism’ [17] to quote Karen Armstrong.” [18]

This brings me to how non-Muslim Westerners view Islam and to the role of the US in keeping antidemocratic regimes in power in Muslim societies, and around the world generally. I have argued elsewhere that in spite of a 1,400 year long shared history, and in spite of the fact that “Islam is as much a part of Abrahamic monotheism as are Judaism and Christianity,” there is very little understanding of Islam in the US and the West. Even and perhaps, especially, in the Academy, only certain types of discourses on Islam get foregrounded that continue to perpetuate ignorant and damaging stereotypes about it.

My own view is that this ignorance “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 [19] complicity in creating many of the conditions that are

conducive' [20] 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 it because of the instrumentalist belief] that there's no value in learning about things that don't impact their own lives in immediate and tangible ways." [21] However, one of the things 9/11 should have brought home to us-and I intend the pun here-is that even as we secure ourselves behind imaginary borders of inside/outside, in real life, what happens "out there" is likely to have repercussions "in here" sooner or later as well.

This is why I believe US-Americans have a stake in the foreign policies that governments pursue in their names and which, for the most part, are conducive to oppression, not democracy. (This isn't the place to lecture you on the nature of these policies and, as I'm sure some of you know, I have been denounced as a cohort of bin Laden and a left wing radical, all in the same breath, for having tried to do so earlier.) Thanks to the growing antiwar movement, there is now an enormous amount of literature out there that is easily accessible, assuming we want to hit some buttons on our computer keyboards.

I also believe that US-Americans have a stake in egalitarian readings of Islam and of their own religions (and secular ideologies) as well that will enable more egalitarian modes of "knowing one another," to use a Qur'anic phrase. In the absence of mutual recognition based in mutual knowledge and understanding, we will be hard put to live peaceably together.

Endnotes

[1] Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.

[2] Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002:1.

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

[4] Asma Barlas, "Religion and our Response to Violence," talk at Cornell University, February 13, 2003.

[5] Barlas, "Believing Women," 2002: 1.

[6] Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984: 90.

[7] Barlas, "Believing Women," p. 2.

[8] Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, Albany: SUNY, 1992, p. 43; her emphasis.

[9] Murata, *Tao of Islam*, p. 44.

[10] Asma Barlas, "Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an," Anderberg lecture, University of Nebraska, 7 November 2002.

[11] Anderberg lecture.

[12] Anderberg lecture.

[13] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1991

[14] Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977: 93; 66.

[15] Barlas, "Believing Women," p. 82

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

[17] Asma Barlas, "Jihad = Holy War = Terrorism: The Politics of Conflation and Denial," forthcoming in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (Winter 2003: 1).

[18] Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, New York: Modern Library, 2000: 166.

[19] 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.

[20] Asma Barlas, "Jihad=Holy War=Terrorism."

[21] Asma Barlas, Anderberg Lecture.