

Women, Politics, and Islam: Rereading Islamic Sources

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I am very happy to be at Middlebury College and I would like to thank Febe Armanios for inviting me here.

She was good enough to help me select a title for my talk that is generic enough to allow me to approach the issue of women and Islam from a number of vantage points. The one I've selected has to do with how the interpretation of sacred knowledge shapes the discourse on Muslim women's rights and, in addressing this theme, I will focus on both hermeneutics and history.

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

However, to keep things interesting, I've structured the talk a bit differently from the book in that I will begin by identifying the different sets of tensions I try and negotiate in my work rather than presenting these tensions as its conclusion.

Although I am going to be focusing on Islam, I think large parts of my argument are broad enough to be applicable to non-religious contexts as well.

Mapping the terrain

Let me begin by defining sacred knowledge and distinguishing it from religious knowledge per se.

By sacred knowledge, I mean the teachings of Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as, literally, God's speech, hence as 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 just said, I believe that human interpretations of divine speech can only be imperfect and incomplete. On the other hand and at the same time, however, I believe that we can have better and worse interpretations of it.

For instance, I view the dominant reading of Islam as a worse reading of it because it 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 the noted Moroccan feminist, 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!)

Reasons why I don't think such readings of Islam are good readings is because, as a number of Muslim scholars—and I'm one of them—have pointed out, it's also possible to read the Qur'an as liberatory and even as 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.

Of course once we open up questions of interpretive and textual 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, including traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics, produced in the first few centuries of Islam in name of communal history.

This contradictory view is then used to defend a patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'an and to discourage new readings of it, especially by women, and it is this move that explains the discursive continuity on women's issues for 1,400 years.

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 these tensions that we open up new space to re-think our engagements with sacred knowledge.

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 the idea that God will something also presumes that only some interpretations of that will are authentic and authoritative.

And this opens up the problem of interpretation that I referred to earlier: put simply, if it possible to read the Qur’an in more than one mode, whose reading should we believe? And on what basis should we make this determination?

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

Indeed, the Qur’an itself asks us to do so. Not only that, but it also advances certain principles for reading it. So here it seems appropriate to examine the Qur’an’s auto-hermeneutics, as I like to call it.

Reading the Qur’an by the Qur’an

The Qur’an frames its guidelines in moral terms and, most often in terms of reading practices that it condemns such as reading it piecemeal, selectively and in a de-contextualized way. And I’d like to quote directly from it:

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 similarly 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 blames those people 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 define.

I find this verse particularly momentous because it establishes quite clearly that (a) we can read the Qur’an in more than one way but (b) 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 like to think of this as a democratic moment in which the Qur’an leaves room for human agency and choice and, indirectly, also suggests that Muslims need to live in societies where they will be able to exercise their 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 to these methodological and ethical principles, the Qur’an also gives us some theological criteria for reading it and, to me, these are absolutely crucial because, after all, if the Qur’an is God’s speech, we cannot hope to 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, then the Qur'an also cannot teach zulm. Of course, we don't all agreed on the meaning of zulm, but one of my claims is that patriarchy is a manifest case of zulm since it permits men to habitually transgress against women's rights. And inasmuch as this is so, I believe we can only read it into the Qur'an at the cost of ascribing zulm to God.

Of course, this is an oversimplified summary of my argument and my point is just to illustrate that we can find theological and 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.

I am going to conclude this talk by locating my reading in the context of a brief discussion of feminisms and, in particular, why I don't call myself a feminist.

Conclusion

Just as it is hard for many non-Muslims to embrace a view of Islam that is liberatory, it is hard for me to embrace feminism as liberatory.

I realize, of course, that there is not just one feminism but many feminisms and in this perhaps I am like those I criticize!

My resistance to feminism stems not from its central premise, that women and men are equally human and deserving of equal rights, but from two facts:

First, I dispute the master narrative of feminism that claims this insight as a peculiarly feminist discovery.

In my own case, for instance, I came to realize that women and men are equal as a result of reading the Qur'an and it wasn't until much later in my life that I encountered feminist texts that then helped me to understand the notion of equality.

So, I do owe an intellectual debt to feminist theorizing for having given me the conceptual tools to recognize and talk about equality and patriarchy.

Second, it seems to me that, for the most part, feminism has secularized the idea of liberation itself such that feminists often assume that to be a believer is already to be victim to a false consciousness that precludes liberation.

Thus, one of the most prominent Muslim feminists can claim that Islam is a patriarchal and even misogynistic religion (and I am referring here to Mernissi whose words I have already quoted).

In fact, most feminists consider not just Islam, but the very concept of God to be oppressive to women and because many Muslim feminists don't believe in God, they don't find it meaningful to engage the Qur'an, or even to read it.

But this doesn't keep some of them from making false claims about it.

For instance, Nawal el Sadawi, the well-known Egyptian novelist, once wrote that the Qur'an advocates stoning to death for adultery, which, by the way, it doesn't. (In fact the Qur'an doesn't prescribe stoning for any sin or crime.)

What I find problematic in all this is not just the ignorance about Islam, but also the fact that, just like the conservative Muslims they criticize, many feminists also confuse the Qur'an with its patriarchal readings or, as I call them, misreadings.

I find this particularly ironic, given feminist theorizing on language and reading which—one assumes—would lead them to realize that, like any other text, the Qur'an also can be read in multiple modes, including oppressive ones.

Of course, I realize that just as there are many readings of the Qur'an there are also many definitions and practices of feminism.

One of these is by Margot Badran who defines Islamic feminism as a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.

As I've had occasion to say before, if this is Islamic feminism, then clearly, I am an Islamic feminist.

Indeed, if this is Islamic feminism, one would assume that all practicing Muslims would be Islamic feminists since we all read the same Qur'an.

But, unfortunately, not all Muslims are Islamic in the sense in which Margot means and not all Muslims read the Qur'an in the same way, as I have argued.

To the contrary, as I've suggested, mainstream Muslim feminism is the antithesis of Islamic feminism and it is this sort of feminism that most Muslims are familiar with. And, just as I don't embrace dominant Muslim readings of the Qur'an, I also resist aligning myself with the dominant approaches to feminism.

It seems to me that, for the term Islamic feminism to acquire salience, we will need to learn to distinguish between Islam and Muslims as well as between

different feminisms. Until we do, there are many Muslim women, like myself, who will resist the label feminist because of what it symbolizes to most people.

I understand that this may be an overly static view of feminism which is also continually being retheorized in much the same way as I am attempting to retheorize the methods by which Muslims read the Qur'an.

So, perhaps what all of us who are engaged in this exercise need to realize is that we share a spirit of critical inquiry and a commitment to rethink our world in order to make it a more hospitable place for both women and men.

This is not a small commonality to share in a world divided over difference.