

Women and Islam:
Re-thinking Texts, Traditions, and Reason

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I would like to thank Lisa Freinkel for inviting me to participate in your COLT reading project. I am very happy to be here and to meet some old friends.

Under the rubric of women and Islam, I'm going to be speaking about the uses and abuses of texts, traditions, and the notion of public reason in theorizing Muslim women's rights, in particular, sexual equality.

On the one hand, I will show how many Muslims abuse all three to argue against equality; on the other, I will locate the possibilities of a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics in the self-same texts, traditions, and reason taking my own work as an illustration.

An occupational hazard of giving so many talks on the same subject is that I've begun to cannibalize myself, to put inelegantly. What I'm sharing with you is a revised version of a paper I've presented before.

For my sake, I hope not many of you have read it and for your sake I hope that my disinclination to reinvent the wheel will not render my talk redundant.

I. The politics (and elisions) of authority

I came to understand the interplay between texts, traditions, and reason as the result of critiquing the structure of religious authority among Muslims. And the reason I became interested in critiquing this structure was because, among Muslims, only some men claim to know what the Qur'an really means, and for the most part, no one questions their authority or their politics of interpretation.

And, yet, as I hope to demonstrate, unless we do so, we run the risk of legitimizing readings of Islam as a "religious patriarchy" (in the words of Kate Millett), that oppresses women.

My own view is that a representation of Islam ignores the relationship between religious knowledge and the means of its production, as well as the differences between a text and its interpretations.

To be more precise, it ignores that what we understand the Qur'an to be saying depends on who reads it, how, and in what contexts.

I will revert to this point a bit later; but, for now, I want to dwell on the response of conservative Muslims to this argument (and by conservative I mean those who read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text). Basically, if one makes this point to them, they barricade themselves behind the bulwark of tradition, moving seamlessly from hermeneutical issues to historical ones.

Thus, it is in the name of Tradition—in the singular and with a capital T—that they reject new readings of the Qur'an on the grounds that for 1,400 years the Muslim community has accepted men's exegesis of the Qur'an as legitimate.

In this instance, Tradition is used to override the text by displacing attention away from the Qur'an to age-old interpretive practices and gender roles. In this way, conservatives delegitimize new work on the Qur'an, especially by women, which threatens men's real and symbolic authority to define religious meaning.

But, tradition also gives us the example of Umm Salama, one of the Prophet's wives, who asked him why the Qur'an was not addressing women when it was still being revealed to him. And the same tradition holds that it was after her question that the Qur'an became the only scripture to address women directly.

However, as soon as one gives such examples, conservatives hurry to take refuge in reason and, specifically, "public reason," to ward off a critique.

I want to illustrate this with an anecdote.

Two years ago, after I gave a talk at New York University, a prominent African-American scholar on the panel chastised me for talking about my reading of the Qur'an as if it were legitimate. Of course, he knew nothing of the reading, but what upset him was that as a non-Arabic speaker I had dared to offer one.

Of course, the issue of language is a crucial one and we could have engaged it productively, but he wasn't interested in a dialogue.

Rather, his purpose seems to have been to put me in my place since he kept repeating that only a reading of the Qur'an that was already part of public reason—and he never defined this concept—was acceptable.

And in response to my questions, he would not explain why a public reason infused by patriarchal assumptions and founded on the oppression of women was even defensible.

(Ironically, this disciplining took place at a forum on “Religious Authority in Islam” but the irony seems to have been lost on most of the attendees.)

My point is that conservatives safeguard dominant readings of the Qur’an (and thus sexual discrimination), as well as their own authority by moving from text to tradition to reason without engaging the critiques directed at them and without opening up text, tradition, or reason themselves to critique.

Troublingly, this chain of elisions operates in exactly the opposite direction as well, and with the same results.

Thus, if one argues that public reason is socially constructed and reflects the hegemony of the dominant social classes, or that it is not always just or ethical (a case in point being public support for slavery in the U.S. for so long), or that women’s work can help to reframe public reason and make it more inclusive, conservatives retreat behind tradition once more.

They revert once more to the artifact of an implicit, but eternally binding public consensus (*ijma*) on what constitutes authoritative religious knowledge, arguing that no one should seek to undo this consensus dating from Islam’s early years.

Now tradition trumps reason and, once again, conservatives can avoid dealing with women’s critiques of religious knowledge, or their readings of the Qur’an.

Where they can’t avoid commenting on such readings, conservatives often discredit them by accusing their authors of not using traditional methodologies.

The traditional method, as Brannon Wheeler (1996), among others, has shown, involves reading “‘backward’ through the scholarship of previous generations” (14) and rests on three claims, two of which I find especially problematic.

One is that “expertise in the use of interpretive reasoning, more than knowledge of the revelation itself is integral to the definition of practice” (68). The other is that “the authority of the practice defined by later generations [is equivalent to] the authority of revelation” (88).

In a sense, then, the traditional method allows interpretive communities to extend “authority from a posited [canonical text]” to themselves and to authorize their “own interpretive privilege” (237; 226) while undercutting the Qur’an’s primacy.

These assumptions are problematic because they erase the distinction in Islamic

theology between "divine speech and its earthly realization,"¹ and they re-locate hermeneutic meaning from the Qur'an to its readings and thence to its interpreters.

In theory, this may seem very democratic; but in reality, given the patriarchal and undemocratic nature of most Muslim societies, it allows interpretive communities to normalize patriarchal and misogynistic readings of the Qur'an.

However, if one critiques this methodology, or proposes an alternative one, as I have done, conservatives take shelter in the text once more, or more precisely in the fixity of its meanings which, they hold, confirms women's inferiority once and for all and makes their critiques of men's knowledge irrelevant.

We thus come full circle, albeit this time from the opposite direction and there seems to be no escape for Muslim women from this circle of oppression.

Structurally, this is the most serious impediment to rereading the Qur'an by means of a new methodology, or rereading it as a community of women.

II. A hermeneutics of liberation

And yet, as the work of many Muslim women scholars shows, we are in fact engaged in precisely such a project that aims to break this interpretive circle.

So, I'm going to shift focus now and in the time remaining to me, speak about a Qur'anic hermeneutics of liberation with reference to my own work.

Some of you may know that in "Believing Women" in Islam² I challenge readings of Islam as a religious patriarchy that puts a "sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience," as Fatima Mernissi³ alleges.

In spite of the hegemony of such readings, I argue against them on both historical and hermeneutic grounds; in other words, by engaging texts, traditions, authority, and reason.

One of the points I make with respect to history is that how Muslims came to read the Qur'an had to do with how they came to define religious epistemology and methodology; and that these were impacted by the complex relationship that evolved between Muslim states and interpretive communities over centuries.

¹ Josef van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology," in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Quran as Text*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996, p. 189.

² Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

³ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.

This analysis is meant both to show how deeply the Qur'an is embedded in patriarchal modes of reasoning and authority, and to underscore the urgency for a hermeneutics of recuperation that can reframe our understanding of it.

The hermeneutical aspects of my argument seek to recover what I term the radically egalitarian and antipatriarchal epistemology of the Qur'an and I make this argument in a series of interrelated steps.

The first is to challenge interpretive reductionism—i.e., the idea that the Qur'an has only one set of patriarchal meanings—by emphasizing the principle of textual polysemy, or the inherently plural nature of reading/ interpretation.

If all texts can have multiple readings, why not the Qur'an?

The second is to argue against interpretive relativism—i.e., the opposite idea that all readings are equally correct and that, therefore a patriarchal reading is as appropriate as an antipatriarchal one.

I argue against this notion on the grounds that some readings are neither contextually legitimate, nor theologically sound.

To give one quick example, readings that project *zulm* (injustice resulting from transgressing against a person's rights) into divine discourse violate the Qur'an's teaching that God never does any *zulm* to people.

To my mind, patriarchies do transgress against women and are a manifest case of *zulm*. Hence, Muslims need to be careful about reading support for patriarchy into the Qur'an. (This is a more complex and nuanced argument of course!)

My third step, then, is to locate the hermeneutic keys for reading the Qur'an in the nature of divine self-disclosure, and while this theological move may upset some people, like other believers, I also hold that the purpose of faith is to act as an "aid to understanding [by enabling one to integrate] thinking and believing."⁴

Indeed, a central aspect of my methodology is to begin my reading of the Qur'an in light of a theologically sound view of God.

I also read the Qur'an in light of a clear definition of patriarchy. This may seem like a minor point, but, it isn't given that none of the feminists who condemn Islam as patriarchal ever define what they mean by patriarchy itself.

⁴ Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994: 51.

I find it useful to 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 encompasses both traditional and modern forms of male domination.)

Significantly, if one applies this definition to the Qur'an, one not only finds no support for patriarchy in its teachings, but one also finds anti-patriarchal elements in the text.

Most importantly, the Qur'an not only rejects the patriarchal imaginary of God as Father, but it also rejects theories of father-right /husband-rule as well as notions of sexual inequality and differentiation.

Moreover, the Qur'an treats sexual equality as an ontological fact, refuses to sexualize moral personality, and holds all believers to the same standards.

Since the Qur'an does not link sex with gender or sexualize differences, it is difficult to derive a theory of gender equality from its teachings.

(I'd be happy to give examples if anyone is interested, in the Q&A period.)

Now, in some ways I am reading the same Qur'an as the conservatives, but I read it by means of a methodology that I derive from the Qur'an itself. (I have discussed this methodology in the paper that some of you will be reading for the seminar tomorrow.)

And, like conservative Muslims, I also begin with the text which, for me, is the apex of knowledge. However, unlike them, I do not believe that one can read or understand it in isolation from its own double history of revelation and reading.

So, traditions also become important to me, but I understand them much as al-Ghazali, Islam's most famous medieval theologians, did.

As he argued in the twelfth century, tradition is "a synthetic rather than a 'natural' product, bearing clear signs of selective endorsement."⁵ It cannot just pass into the present "unprocessed and unmediated."

⁵ Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (Karachi: Oxford University Press) 2002:20.

As he said, “someone has to make decisions about which aspects of the past are non-essential and thus allowed to drop out, and which elements of the present are consistent with the past and thus eligible for admission into the sanctum of tradition.”⁶

This is equally true of Qur’anic exegesis and it is instructive to read how and why some readings of it became dominant over others. (Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi both offer incisive critiques of that process.)

To me, however, historicizing tradition or even Qur’anic exegesis is not enough for a liberatory hermeneutics; it is also necessary to critique the instrumentalist reason by means of which certain interpretations are deemed authoritative or interpretive authority is exercised in the public sphere.

And while I have not so far attempted to define “Islamic” reason, I believe that a liberatory Qur’anic hermeneutics must begin by challenging the patriarchal rationality in terms of which “man” is viewed as the sole arbiter of truth and male supremacy is accepted as the cornerstone of faith.

This is all the more necessary because the Qur’an is not male or phallogocentric in spite of conservative Muslim and feminist assumptions to the contrary. (As I said earlier, I’d be happy to elaborate on this in the Q&A period.)

At this point, many Muslims start to question my right to read the Qur’an as well as the putative authoritativeness of my reading. After all, I do belong to any interpretive community, nor am I a male, or even a recognized scholar of Islam!

However, as a Muslim woman I have a great deal at stake in how Muslims interpret the Qur’an, and in reading it, I remain very much within the tradition that holds that any Muslim may qualify as an interpreter, or mujtahid.

A mujtahid is a believer imbued with a sense of God-consciousness, and a believer’s right to interpret religion derives not from social sanctions, formal knowledge, or even expertise, but from the depths of our own convictions and from the advice the Qur’an gives each one of us to exercise our own intellect and knowledge—such as they are—to read it for its “best meanings.”

Now, whether or not readings like mine will ever become part of public reason, or whether Muslims will ever interrogate the very notion of reason as it is exercised will depend on whether or not Muslim societies will be able to become more open, tolerant, and democratic.

⁶ Jackson, 24.

After all, hermeneutic and existential questions are always connected and while one can read liberation out of oppression, one cannot practice liberty in the midst of oppression.

I want to be clear, however, that when I speak about the oppression in Muslim societies, I do so from a fundamentally different vantage point than the current U.S. administration and right-wing U.S. academics.

For one, I don't view oppression to be inherently Islamic or a function of some genetic predisposition on the part of Muslims towards despotism.

To believe this is to elide centuries of European colonial exploitation of Muslim societies as well as the pernicious U.S. practice of supporting dictators around the world, including in the so-called "Muslim world."

For another, I don't view democracy as the prerogatives of only the West.

To believe this is to disregard the history of racial, sexual, and class oppression that has accompanied the construction of the West, to say nothing of the present politically charged and combative moment of war and fanaticism in the U.S.

I end, then, at a very different place from where I began and this is just as well because, often the very people who are most interested in Muslim can't see the connections they may have with these women or with the oppressive conditions in which they live because of the way in which U.S. hegemony renders those connections invisible.

So, I will leave you with the thought that whether or not Muslim women will ever be able to enjoy full rights hinges not only on the willingness of Muslims to effect meaningful social change, but also on the ability of non-Muslim Americans to rethink their own relationships to Muslims and to the rest of the world.