

## **“Will the ‘Real’ Islam Please Stand Up?”**

**Asma Barlas**

**(Text of talk delivered at Yale University, February 21, 2002)**

I'll begin by thanking Saad Khanani of the Muslim Students Association, and Judith Krauss, Master of Silliman College, for inviting me to tea.

You've told me to keep my remarks short and informal and I've tried to do that, but I did write them down. This way, I can get the quotes right and I also will be able to share my comments with interested colleagues who couldn't be here with us today.

### **The title and the talk**

I've borrowed the title of my talk—Will the “Real” Islam Please Stand Up?—from an essay written by a man calling himself “an average American” that was circulated on the internet last October. I hope you didn't read into it the promise of an answer because what I intend to do is to problematize the question, not to answer it.

I will do this by asking some questions of my own: how are we to understand such calls to identify the “real” Islam? Is this even an appropriate way to frame the question? And, should Muslims respond to it? In other words, I'm going to be engaging not Islam, but the dominant modes of engaging Islam and Muslims, especially in the wake of 9/11.

I feel it's useful to do this in order to show why the public discourse on Islam as it is structured actually prevents people from gaining a real understanding of it. In fact, much of this discourse is little more than an ideological assault on Islam, often thinly disguised as an innocent quest for knowledge.

### **“Average Americans” and the “real” Islam**

An example is the essay by the “average American” which was circulated widely, partly by secular Muslims, whose sentiments it seems to echo. Why—asks this man—has the media in the wake of 9/11 been bombarding him with instructions on how I should ‘understand’ Islam? Thanks but no thanks. I really don't give a rat's --- about Islam. . . . I just want to hang the people who did it and never let anyone think they can do it again. Not here. I live here. . . . [If it is true that] these terrorist guys who pulled off the 9/11 attacks don't really represent the actual

Islamic faith . . . why should I be the target audience on what the 'true' Islam really is? Shouldn't the media . . . be instructing these 'wayward' Muslims and their followers who have 'hijacked' Islam about the true meaning of the Koran and Islam? . . . why are you telling me? I don't really care about their religion.

After disavowing his own interest in Islam and suggesting that there's no point in others learning about it either, the "average American" fires off seven questions at Muslims, of which I will quote only one. Why, he asks, are Muslims making it "sound like there are two versions of the Koran floating around out there. If so, what is the difference between the Koran that the Terrorists are reading, and the Koran that the rest of the Muslim world is reading? . . . I need to have the 'real' Islam please stand up."

Even as he demands "direct and specific answers" to his questions, the "average American" also makes it clear that he's not prepared to hear history about the Crusades, or the US foreign policy crap, or the rage of Muslims, or the Palestinian claims to the same land as the Israelis, or comparisons to Christianity and Judaism, or stories of poverty or hunger, or the CIA . . .and 'blame the victim' excuses. . . . At this point, the majority of Americans don't want to hear excuses. We want action.

I can't do an extensive reading of this essay today, but I want to make some, perhaps obvious, points about it.

I will, for the moment, take his claim at face value that the media did, in fact, start bombarding us with instructions about how to understand the real Islam immediately after 9/11 though that definitely hasn't been my own experience of it.

First, the average American clearly holds "Islam" rather than Muslims responsible for 9/11; this is evident from the fact that it is the "real" Islam that he wants to stand up in the wake of 9/11 (notice how he speaks of Islam as if it were a person), as well as from the fact that he rules out the possibility that politics or economics or much of anything else could explain the hijackers' actions.

This confusion of Islam with Muslims is common enough in the West, but it is restricted only to Islam. Certainly, no one asked the "real Judaism" to stand up when Jewish terrorist groups began the practice of bombing civilians in the Middle East in the 1940s and '50s. Nor did people ask the "real Christianity" to stand up in the wake of the Crusades, the Conquest, or the slave trade. Nor were there demands for the "real Shintoism" to stand up in the wake of the Japanese kamikaze bombings of World War II.

In fact, we usually explain such events in terms of a mix of political, economic, cultural, historical, and ideological factors. So why ignore history, culture, politics, economics, and ideology where it comes to Muslims? For example, why not interpret 9/11 in terms of a twisted Saudi nationalism, given that bin Laden and

most of the hijackers were Saudis?

Second, the average American puts a billion Muslims, to say nothing of Islam itself, on call for the actions of a few men. By this logic, he should blame all Americans for the U.S. bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the Japanese had broadcast their terms of surrender, all Germans for the Holocaust, the whole right-wing for Timothy McVeigh's actions, etc. How is it that everyone can claim individualized identities, thus being able to disassociate themselves from people with whose actions they disagree, but not Muslims?

Third, the "average American" makes it sound as if the problem of interpretive pluralism and extremism are unique to Islam, as if there are no contestary readings of Judaism and Christianity and no extremist Jews or Christians or secular humanists, for that matter! He thus suggests that there is a radical difference between Muslims and everyone else.

Fourth, notice how his avowed disinterest in Islam does not keep the "average American" from authoritatively grilling Muslims, and while his questions pretend to open up some conversational space, he shuts it down by a priori characterizing any sort of response on our parts as an "excuse" and by demanding "action," not excuses. What this action might entail seems clear from the ever-broadening scope of the "war against terrorism."

### **The academic face of Janus**

In case you think I've picked an obscure piece by a nameless fellow to talk about, let me give you the more high-brow example of Bernard Lewis, the noted expert on Islam whose latest book, *What Went Wrong?* was reviewed by Paul Kennedy in the *New York Times Book Review* (January 27, 2002: 9). Since I've just begun reading it, I'm going to speak only about Kennedy's summary of it and its presentation by the Book Review.

Those who've seen the Book Review will recall that on the cover the headline is "Islam Builds a Prison And locks itself inside" (notice how the Review also speaks about Islam as if it were a person). Inside, the headline is "The Real Culture Wars," and under it: "Bernard Lewis writes on the conflict between the West and Islam that has been centuries in the making."

On Lewis's account, this conflict between Islam and the West, which he considers "one of the greatest cultural and political divides in modern history," is the result of the fact that whereas in the 18th century, the US and Western Europe "took off to another world, one that was increasingly secular, democratic, industrial and tolerant . . . the Middle East . . . did not. . . the Muslim world rested on its laurels—until it was besieged by Western ships, armaments, iron goods and cheap textiles, to all of which it became harder and harder to

respond.”

Not only did the Muslim world lag behind, argues Lewis, but it has failed to catch up as is clear from the fact that “Mozart and Shakespeare and Voltaire . . . Stravinsky, jazz, and George Orwell . . . stop at the frontiers of the Arab world, which has shown little interest in how others think, write, compose.” (In making this argument, claims Kennedy, Lewis isn’t assuming Western cultural superiority but merely recording the disturbing fact “that this troubled part of our planet has never really cared.”)

“What, then, is to be done?” asks Kennedy rhetorically, and answers his own question by paraphrasing Lewis: they can continue on “a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression,” or, they can “abandon grievance and victimhood, settle their differences and join their talents, energies and resources in a common creative endeavor . . . the choice is their own.”

Again, I can’t do an extensive reading of this review, but notice how Lewis also confuses Islam with Muslims and Arabs and, in fact, with the Middle East. The fact that Islam is a religion, Arabs and Muslims a people, and the Middle East a geographic region doesn’t seem to bother him.

Notice, also, his tendency to speak of Muslim societies in terms not of history or politics or economics or culture, but essentializing psychological essences of “hate and spite, rage and self-pity . . . grievance and victimhood.” Is there any single group of people, other than Muslims, about whom anyone could speak in this vein and not be called a racist?

It’s true that Lewis wrote his book before 9/11, but his view of Muslims also helps to re-present 9/11 in purely religious and psychological terms, like the average American does, in so far as it promotes the tautology that whatever Muslims do, they do because they are Muslims, and Muslims are filled with hate and rage because they are Muslims. Such a view lets everyone else off the hook from having to undertake any sort of self-critique. In fact, suggesting that we need to rethink policies that may be aiding the political-economy of terrorism immediately evokes the charge of being anti-American, as I’m finding out.

Further, Lewis also assumes a radical difference between Islam and the West in his view of a “Muslim world” hermetically sealed off from the West. I won’t here get into the issue of the role of Western colonialism in shaping the history of that “troubled part of our planet,” or the fact that most of the hijackers came from a Western educated elite.

I can’t detail the other points of similarity between Lewis and the average American in this short time, but I do want to suggest that they constitute the academic and popular sides of the same coin; in fact, one authorizes and legitimizes the other. After all, would the phrase the “Real Culture Wars” have

any resonance if there wasn't a demand to have the "real" Islam "stand up?"

I'm still thinking about what this desire for "the real" both reveals and also masks in an age where the relationship between fiction and reality is becoming inverted, specially after reading Slavoj Zizek's essay, "Welcome to the desert of the Real" (September 17, 2001). But it is clear to me that between them, Lewis and the average American have managed to construct the "real" Islam in such a way as to deny Muslims interpretive authority and voice as well as the right to define or historicize ourselves, and all while demonizing us!

So, on the one hand, Muslims are being badgered to define the "real" Islam and, on the other, we're being told what the "real" Islam is and that too by people who aren't even Muslims! Aren't such people as guilty as the terrorists were of hijacking Islam to serve their own ends? And are they really invested in our speaking meaningfully about Islam?

### **Islam's reality for Muslims**

Even though the public discourse is not conducive for any kind of soul searching on the part of Muslims, or anyone else for that matter, and even though it is silencing Muslims, I believe we have a great deal at stake in continuing to talk about Islam. As someone who believes that the real Islam is radically egalitarian and antipatriarchal, I am in fact very invested in a dialogue, which is why I wrote "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Part of my aim in this book is to show that oppressive readings of the Qur'an are a function of who has read it, how, and in what contexts. To be specific, they are the result of the interpretive strategies that Muslims have (or have not) used to read the Qur'an, as well as of how religious authority has been structured in Muslim patriarchal societies, or, rather, patriarchal societies that happen to be Muslim.

Of course, to say that meanings are always contingent—in other words, that knowledge is never independent of the contexts and processes of its own production—is not to say anything new, at least in most circles. But, once we recognize the role of human agency and social structures in interpretive processes, the question becomes not "will the real Islam stand up?" but how and why did Muslim identities, consciousnesses, and histories intertwine in specific ways to produce certain readings of Islam rather than others?

This way of framing the question allows us to distinguish between the Qur'an and its exegesis on the one hand, and between religious texts, cultures, and histories on the other, both of which we must learn to do in order to challenge oppressive readings of Islam.

We also must learn to read the Qur'an for its "best meanings," as the Qur'an itself tells us to do. Such an injunction clearly recognizes that we can read a text in multiple ways but that not all readings of it may be equally appropriate. And, indeed, the Qur'an specifies some criteria for judging between the contextual legitimacy of different readings.

So, our own religion obliges us to define its reality in ever better ways and also to contest militaristic, misogynistic, and oppressive readings of it. (I'm assuming that such readings can't possibly be the best, unless, of course, we are willing to embrace a completely depraved view of God as oppressive and misogynistic.)

Although I reject the view that all Muslims are responsible for the events of 9/11, I do feel that we all need to challenge interpretive extremism rather than ignoring it or trying to wash our hands off it. I know some Muslims believe that such problems will disappear if we personalize religion, as in the West. I feel this is just an excuse for evading communal responsibility in the name of an enlightened secularism. As we've learned from history, personalizing religion has not done away with extremism. It has merely sanctified the myth that what I do with my religious beliefs does not concern others.

I believe a dialogue among Muslims is long overdue, and not just because of 9/11. That is something we owe ourselves, not average Americans.