"A Collective Purpose: Crossing Cultural Boundaries:"
Learning to Engage Islam and Muslims
Women's Symposium
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I am honored to deliver this year's Emmie Baine lecture and to know that I may be the first Muslim woman to have been invited by the Symposium to do so. Perhaps for that reason there are high expectations of me, since I've been told that you not only want me to share my thoughts on women in Islam with you, but also to give you "a broad view of Islam and how it is interpreted/ practiced culturally in different countries." In addition, I'm supposed to talk about where cultural misunderstandings occur in comprehending my views.

I have to be honest and say at the outset that this is a tall order! It's like trying to give a broad view of Christianity and how it is interpreted/ practiced in different countries. In fact, it is difficult to talk about how Christianity is interpreted and practiced right here in the U.S. in a single talk, at least in a meaningful way.

For that matter, it's hard to cover even one denomination of Christianity given internal variations. Take Methodists themselves: there is Southern Methodist, United Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Free Methodist, Evangelical Methodist, and so on.

Then, too, I don't know if one can go seamlessly from knowing how people practice their religion to understanding the religion itself since there are so many slippages between theory and practice, religion and culture, texts and history.

So, I am going to interpret the first part of my charge a bit narrowly.

There are a billion Muslims in the world today, of different races and ethnicities, living in societies as culturally diverse as the U.S. is from Saudi-ruled Arabia or Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was from Indonesia. It is just not possible to consider the variations in their practices in a short lecture, even in broad strokes.

However, to the extent that Muslim women everywhere are subordinated to men and people blame Islam itself for this, I think one can make some generalizations about how most Muslims interpret the Qur'an with regard to women's issues and the problems with those interpretations. To these two topics I have added a third, which is how I read the Qur'an myself.

I. Interpreting Islam

To me it is a self-evident truth that a God who rejects sex/ gender as a category both for self-description and for judging human beings, is also above sexual partisanship. There is simply no heavenly or earthly, logical or theological, reason for such a God to hate women or to teach men to oppress them either.

Yet, to embrace this Qur'anic view of God is to fall afoul of those seemingly pious Muslims who read the Qur'an as saying that God made men superior to women even if by a single degree (darajah), appointed them women's guardians (qawwamun), allowed them to marry four wives and even to beat (daraba), a disobedient (nushuz) one, to inherit twice a woman's share in property, etc. To be born a Muslim is to be confronted with the alleged incontrovertibility of these readings even though each one of them can be quite easily faulted.

1. For instance, on closer scrutiny, it turns out that the Qur'an doesn't use the word degree, or darajah, to refer to male ontological superiority; rather, it uses the word only in connection with a husband's privileges in the event of a divorce. But, it's far from clear what exactly his privilege is since some scholars believe that it lies in his being able to pronounce a divorce while others say it lies in his being able to revoke a divorce. In either case, the degree has nothing to do with male ontology or men's rights in general.[1]

Indeed, the Qur'an teaches that women and men are ontologically the same since they both originated in a single self (nafs); nafs, incidentally, is feminine plural. There is no Qur'anic narrative that the woman was created from the man's rib or even that Adam was created before the woman. "Adamah," as one scholar has pointed out, simply means "of the soil,"[2] as in Hebrew.

2. Similarly, the word qawwamun can denote the husband's financial role as bread-winner rather than male guardianship over women, and in fact that is how some of the earliest scholars of the Qur'an (male, I might add) interpreted it. Indeed, the Qur'an designates women and men as each other's awliya, or guides, and charges them both to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong. How can they play this role vis-à-vis one another if men have complete authority over women?[3]

3. Then, too, the whole edifice of polygyny begins to collapse once we note that

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[1] See Amina Wadud, The Qur'an and Woman, Oxford University Press, 1999.

[2] Riffat Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective." In Karen Lebacqz (ed.,) Sexuality: A Reader, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999.

[3] Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory?" Women's Studies International Forum, Special Issue: Women and Islam. 5, no. 2 (1982): 218.

the Qur'an only allows certain of the male guardians of female orphans to marry more than one as a way to ensure justice for the orphans. But the same verse also insists that it is better to marry only one wife so as not to be partial to another. (As an aside, I should note that polygyny pre-dates Islam and, other than Jesus, none of the Hebrew prophets was celibate or monogamous. Some, like David, reportedly had 900 wives and concubines.)

4. Likewise, the "wife-beating" verse begins to unravel once we realize that the word that is translated as "to beat" derives from the root daraba that has several other meanings, including "to separate." For me, the perennial question then is why have Muslims chosen one meaning—and the worst—above all others? Indeed, the Qur'an teaches that love should be the basis of marriage (and this in the seventh century!) and it enjoins mercy and liberality between spouses even if they hate one another or are in the process of getting divorced.

Translations of nushuz as the wife's disobedience also become indefensible when we see Qur'anic references to nushuz on a husband's part. Moreover, as scholars have shown, the Qur'an never obliges a wife to obey her husband.[4]

5. As for inheritance, it is true that a brother gets twice the share of a sister but only if there is more than one. If a parent dies and leaves behind only one daughter, she gets half the parent's property. Then, too, if a person leaves behind a brother and a sister, each gets one sixth of the property. And, if a person leaves behind parents, the mother gets twice as much as the father.

6. Similarly, while it is true that two women may stand in place of one man as witnesses if person is contracting a debt, it is equally true that in the much more consequential matter of adultery, the woman's testimony overrides that of the man's. If a husband accuses his wife of adultery on his own witness, she may refute his charge, also on her own witness, and her word is—legally—the last.

My point is what we read the Qur'an to be saying depends on who reads it, how, and in what contexts. If Muslims have read it as a patriarchal text it is also true that only men have interpreted it historically and they have done so piecemeal and always in patriarchal contexts.

However, as several Muslim scholars are showing, one can read the Qur'an very differently and even as an antipatriarchal text, as I have attempted to do. There are many aspects to my reading, but, today I will focus only on one way to "unread" patriarchy out of the Qur'an.

[4] See Wadud on this point, 1999.

I should clarify that by patriarchy I mean two things: on the one hand a mode of father's rule that is based in representations of God as Father (traditional patriarchy), and, on the other, a politics of sexual differentiation that privilege males while Otherizing women[5] (modern and secular forms of patriarchy).

If one applies these definitions to read the Qur'an, one finds no support in it for either form of patriarchy and indeed clear challenges to both.

For one thing, the Qur'an does not represent God as Father and in fact it forbids Muslims from sacralizing God as such, or even from using similitude for God. God, the Qur'an says, is uncreated, hence above sex/ gender, and God also is unrepresentable even if human languages invariably masculinize God.

For another, the Qur'an also does not sacralize fathers or fatherhood and, to the contrary, it says that "following the ways of the father" has deterred people from worshipping God. To me, this is a clear rejection of traditional patriarchy for what else is traditional patriarchy if not following "the ways of the father?"

Of course, the Qur'an recognizes that patriarchies exist and that men are the locus of authority within them, and it frequently addresses men. But to recognize patriarchy, or to address men, is not to advocate male privilege!

Equally importantly, the Qur'an does not use biological sex to privilege males and to Otherize women as do modern and secular forms of patriarchy. In fact, the Qur'an does not even associate sex with gender. By this I mean it recognizes biological (sexual) differences but it does not assign them any gender symbolism. There is therefore no concept of gendered man or woman in the Qur'an.[6] Not a single verse links men and women to a specific division of labor or define their roles as a function of their biology, or say that biological differences make men and women unequal, incompatible, incommensurable, or opposites.

It is true that the Qur'an treats women and men differently in some cases, but this doesn't mean that it makes them unequal. As we now know, difference itself does not always imply inequality; besides, the Qur'an doesn't tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about biology or inequality.

That is why I find it pointless to blame the Qur'an itself for women's oppression because—as I've tried to show even in this short time and even in this summary fashion—we can read it in better and worse ways and, significantly, the Qur'an itself asks us to read it for its "best meanings." Of course, this is hard to do in

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[5] Zillah Eisenstein, The Female Body and the Law, California: University Press, 1988: 90.
[6] Wadud, 1999: 35.

anti-democratic and patriarchal contexts which is why I believe that in order to emancipate women we also need fundamental social, political, economic, and intellectual reform of Muslim states and societies.

II. Cultural roadblocks

I want to shift focus now and talk about my second charge, which was to discuss where cultural misunderstandings occur in understanding my views on Islam. Here I've interpreted my charge more broadly because the Symposium's theme would be better served if I were to talk about where misunderstandings occur in understanding Islam and Muslims in general.

I feel it's more worthwhile to speak about misunderstandings in this fashion because while I agree that collective purposes require one to traverse borders, I worry that the political culture here doesn't equip people to do so in meaningful ways. I say this as someone who has lived in the U.S. for nearly 25 years.

Again, this is a large topic and so I will only focus on four common roadblocks that hamper understanding between nonMuslims and Muslims:

- using the term "Islam and the West;"
- remembering history selectively;
- being fearful of difference, and
- branding Muslims with "the mark of the plural"

I'd like to consider each of these in turn.

1. I'm sure you've read the term "Islam and the West" and may even have used it. I certainly have even though it very problematically suggests that Islam and the West are opposed to one another and even destined to come into conflict. This "clash of civilizations" theory, by the way, has been around since medieval times but it has been given a new lease on life not by Muslim extremists (who may believe in it) but by secular U.S. academics like Bernard Lewis.

But pitting Islam against the West is meaningless since Islam is a religion and the West is an imaginary geography, as Edward Said called it.[7] It's like contrasting Texas with Christianity rather than with another state; it just makes no sense.

This oppositional framing of Islam and the West also doesn't work in explaining the identities of many Muslims, and not just those who were born in "the West." Take my own example: I was educated in Catholic convents by Western nuns in

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[7] Edward Said, Orientalism, NY: Vintage, 1979.

Pakistan and my first language is English. Yet, it is through my education that I give voice to my sense of self as a Muslim and also to my belief that the Qur'an, is a liberatory and antipatriarchal text, for reasons I've just shared with you.

And, if this strikes you as being too anecdotal to be of analytical value, then let me point out that there are millions of Muslims in the West (around 6-7 in the U.S. and ten in Europe). In fact, Islam—or, more accurately, Muslims—were already in the West much before the West came to call itself by that name.

When Muslims conquered Spain in the eighth century, and for much of their 800-year long rule in Spain, it was customary for scholars to speak of Eastern and Western Christianity and Eastern and Western Islam. There was no notion as yet that the West was the abode of nonMuslims and the East of Muslims.

Then, too, something of the West before it was the West became part of Muslim learning by way of the ancient Greeks. If Muslim philosophers had not engaged Aristotle and Plato, the West—as it now is—could not have laid claim to Greek heritage either. Or, for that matter, to a vast body of art, science, medicine, architecture, and learning that eventually made the West the West.

My point is that cultural borders were once rather fluid and Islam and the West were interconnected from the moments of their earliest encounters and not only or always in oppositional ways.

2. Of course, there is also a long history of mutual violence between them. As we know, Islam became a problem for Europeans when Muslim armies overran much of the medieval world. And today, an anti-Western "jihad," as it is being wrongly called, is in full swing, even if only by a tiny minority of the world's one billion Muslims. Then, too, crusading endured in Europe for 800 years off and on and Western colonialism ravaged many Muslim countries for centuries.

I don't want to down-play this violence and, in fact, in my most recent work I am exploring its theology and history. Still, I wonder why we have collectively chosen to remember only the violence and, worse, why we insist on making this violence the burden solely of Islam today.

Everything else that Muslims passed on to Europeans, including universities, libraries, book-publishing, the concept of zero, Algebra, the discovery—500 years before Galileo—that the earth revolves on its axis, optics, mechanical clocks, mensural music, neo-Platonism, hospitals, have been forgotten and willfully so. I say willfully because historical memory isn't accidental. As the great Muslim theologian, al-Ghazali, said over a millennium ago, "someone has to make

decisions about which aspects of the past are . . . allowed to drop out, and which elements of the present . . . [are] eligible for admission into . . . tradition."[8]

One could argue, of course, that by its very nature memory is selective. Even so, I wonder why Westerners have chosen to remember the worst about Muslims and, even more intriguingly, why they see themselves as their victims in spite of the centuries of crusading, colonialism, and neo-colonialism on their own parts.

How many people who denounce Islam as violent are taught that the burden of violence is a shared one and that it can only be apportioned fairly if the West is willing to carry its own (and I might add disproportionately large) share as well?

3. Projecting violence onto "evil" Muslims has to do with the third roadblock and that is how people construct the Other in relationship to the Self. And, at the heart of these constructions is a fear of difference itself .

Representing sexual difference as threatening has allowed men to commit unspeakable crimes against women; representing racial difference as polluting has allowed white people to justify enslaving and killing black and brown people and, depicting religious diversity as contaminating has served to unleash bloody wars, holy or otherwise, by groups against one another throughout history.

Of course, fear of difference takes more subtle forms as well. For instance, a 2004 poll conducted by Cornell showed that 44 percent of people favored limiting the civil liberties of U.S. Muslims.[9] And a 2006 Gallop survey found that 34% of people believe U.S. Muslims support al-Qaeda; 39% advocate that they should carry special IDs, and one in four doesn't want a Muslim as their neighbor.[10]

It is partly this fear of difference (the Other) and love of similarity (Self) that lies behind the impulse towards both annihilation as well as assimilation. Yet, as Fontaine Belford argues, "Only through meeting the other, the stranger, can the world be transformed. … In the Hebrew Scripture, the role played by the stranger, and our relationship to this person, are . . . crucial." The Bible, she says, condemns both killing the stranger and trying to take away their "strangeness."[11]

The Qur'an doesn't speak of strangers, but it teaches that God created us "from a single (pair) Of a male and a female, And made [us] into Nations and tribes, that

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[8] Sherman Jackson, On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam (Karachi: Oxford University Press) 2002: 24.
[9] http://www.news.cornell.edu/releases/Dec04/Muslim.Poll.bpf.html
[10] http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2006/8/14/45330/1632
[11] Fontaine Belford, "Thinking about Difference Differently," mimeo, page 9.

[we] may know each other (Not that ye may despise Each other)." The most honored in God's sight, it says, is "the most Virtuous of you" (49:13).[12]

But today many people plumb scriptures for verses that sanctify their own blood lust and their own vision of imperial conquest and hankering after power.

4. I come now to the last point. If Muslims have become the West's Other, the strangers who are unknowable and unlovable, it is also because of the tendency to think of us in the singular. And, paradoxically, this happens because of the old colonial practice of branding non-Westerners with "the mark of the plural." This is how Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jew, described the way in which Western colonizers treated their subject populations abroad.

I would like to read you a paragraph from his book, The Colonizer and the Colonized, and wherever you hear the word colonized, substitute Muslim):

> The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner [but] . . . entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ('They are this.' 'They are all the same.'). If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract. … He will say, 'You can't count on them.' … his maid's life . . . in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual.[13]

In many ways, Muslims also don't exist as individuals in the U.S. Rather, they exist as a faceless mob that is thought to be wired into one consciousness and one brain, like the Borg in Star Trek, and how can one go about trying to build a collective purpose with this threatening, amorphous, unknowable, horde?

Some questions

This has been a long address so I will end with a short conclusion; however, instead of trying to put closure to what I've said or wrapping things up in a neat little package, I'd like to open up some difficult questions:

- Is it possible at the level of language to avoid putting the Other on the opposite side of the fence as we put ourselves?
- At the level of memory, can we learn to reclaim our own role, no matter how unethical and destructive, in how the world is?

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[12] Yusuf Ali, The Qur'an, NY: Tehrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1988: 1407.
[13] Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, Beacon, 1991: 85

- At the level of the psyche, can we let in the stranger who might well unsettle our assumptions about the world? and
- In our social interactions can we start to honor the specificity of others even while recognizing ourselves as communal?

Better yet, can we learn to think of the self as that maddeningly obscure and yet utterly lucid French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, does: "For it is not the other which is another I, but the I which is an other, a fractured I?"[14] Can we embrace the fractures, the difference, the Otherness, that lie at our own core?

Can we chip away at the armor of hostility, indifference, hubris, and lack of knowledge—or to put it less politely—ignorance, in which many of us have imprisoned ourselves? In reality, of course, we resist dismantling our defenses, even when they do not serve us well because we've learned to make peace with who we are and what we believe and we don't want to risk the pain of unlearning it, even if it sets us free. But, then, can we devise collective purposes or cross cultural boundaries without taking any risks and being bound by our own "fear of freedom?"[15]

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[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Columbia University Press, 1994: 261.
[15] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, 2000.