

Interview with Asma Barlas: "It Is the Right for Every Muslim to Interpret the Quran for Themselves"

11 January 2007

One of the scholars who try to offer a more emancipatory interpretation of the Quran is Asma Barlas. She closely examines the male-oriented interpretations of the Quran and offers an antipatriarchal alternative

Your ideas in your book, "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an, are not as controversial as Prof. Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid's theses on the ontological aspect of the Quran. Instead of saying that the Quran itself is the product of culture in the Arabian Peninsula, you foremost seem to criticize the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran. Why do you not consider the Quran itself as the problem?

Asma Barlas: Because as a believing Muslim I do not believe it is the problem. I have never questioned the ontological status of the Quran as a divine speech. For me as a Muslim, the starting premise is that the Quran, ontologically, is the speech of God. The problem thus lies not in the divine discourse of the sacred text, but the problem lies in that we interpret inappropriately. So for me the crux of the problem is not "the text itself", as it is for many scholars, but rather the human appropriation of it.

I do not think that the problem lies at the very notion of something being sacred; the problem lies in how we conceptualize the sacred. For me it is the content of sacredness that is at stake here, not the idea of the sacred. Those are two different things, the idea and the contents.

As Fazlur Rahman also used to say, I think it is not possible and it is not desirable to have complete unanimity of opinion, to have only one reading of the Quran. Difference of opinion could lead to new kind of synthesis that keeps the conversation alive, and keeps us thinking and keeps us stretching our minds.

I do not think we should strive towards uniformity, because that is the mark of fundamentalism. I agree to disagree, and I say furthermore that disagreement is a fact of life, which is mentioned hundreds of times in the Quran. The matters in which you disagree will be referred to back to God. The Quran says that God created different tribes and that there is diversity, so that is not necessarily bad.

Don't you think that the Quran's permission for polygamy reflects the culture of seventh century Arabs?

Barlas: There are two comments I could make about that. One is that the Quran is both particular and universal and I always make that claim side by side. It is particular in the sense that its first audience were seventh century Arabs and nobody should pretend that that was not the case.

In addition, since the Quran was directly addressing seventh century Arabs it is

spoken in a language and in a way that was relevant to those people's lives. But the Quran is also universal. The concept of sexual modesty, for example, is a universal concept in the Quran, while the particular mode of just is a particular instance of Arab culture. Therefore, I think it is quite possible to distinguish between what is universal in the Quran and what is particular.

Secondly, as far as polygamy is concerned, it is very important to look at certain concepts historically. No Hebrew prophet other than Jesus was either celibate or monogamous. King David, the king of Israel had 900 wives and concubines. In Islam, the practice has been circumscribed and framed into terms of certain conditionality.

I am one of those people that claim that the Quranic provision on polygamy is only with reference to female orphans and is only allowed if those two or three conditions that the Quran mentions are fulfilled. And this is very difficult to do, which is why that same Quranic verse ends by saying it is better if you marry only once. I think that most Muslims who are marrying four wives are actually acting very unquranic. Which part of the Quranic injunction on marriage do they not understand when it says that marriage should not be for lust? Do not tell me those men are accumulating those wives just out of piety!

We can speak about the historical aspect of things and look for reasons instead of blindly and ritualistically imitating things when it suits us.

Are you optimistic that your feminist approach towards the Quran and Islamic discourse can become the dominant discourse in the Muslim world?

Barlas: I prefer not to call myself a feminist, because I think the concept itself needs a great deal of clarification. Many feminists condemn Islam as a patriarchal religion. Until there is a greater clarity within the Muslim community about what feminism is, I prefer to just simply say: I am a believer. Am I optimistic? No. I am not optimistic, not at all, because many of the conservative forces are terribly strong.

Will I in my lifetime see a major shift in how Muslims are thinking? Again, I am not very optimistic, but I will struggle to do what I think I have to do. Because I take a historical approach to my own work, which is to say: I do not know when something like this will have an impact or if it will have an impact, or how wide of an impact it will have, but I do it out of a certain ethical and moral commitment to myself and my religion.

Do you think your thoughts could have emerged in the same way if you would not have been involved with the feminist discourse in the West?

Barlas: I always acknowledge that I am very indebted to feminists and feminist thinking. To say I prefer not to put that label of feminist on myself is not to say that I am not influenced by how feminists think. I work together with some feminists and I have been influenced by their ideas, but I also take a critical approach in a way that many feminists do not take.

Would I have learned to think in this particular way if I was not a product of a particular education and culture? Probably not, since one does not think outside the frameworks in which one has been educated and culturated. I am very much a

cultural hybrid in the sense that my education, even in Pakistan, was very western. I was educated in a catholic school and my first language was English, which was the language we spoke at home with our parents. I am very much a product of both an Islamic sensibility and a Western education.

How does your audience perceive your way of looking at the Quran?

Barlas: Many people are profoundly disturbed by what I have to say, although I do not think that some of the things I am saying are controversial at all. For example, I argue that we need to avoid masculinizing God, because certain implications will flow from that for men and for women. Some of the things I am saying are very Quranic and I do not see them as intrinsically controversial. But it is the very fact that in many Muslim communities the people that define religious knowledge are primarily men, and primarily but not exclusively conservative men. Therefore, it is disturbing for them to hear someone who comes along and say the things I say.

Particularly, surprisingly enough, the fact that I claim that it is the right for every Muslim to read and interpret the Quran for themselves. They immediately think it means a very elaborate process of exegesis that only philologists, linguists and scholars can undertake. One of my recurrent messages is that the Quran came also for the unlettered Bedouin in the desert; therefore, it cannot be preserved only for scholars and jurists.

We have no priest class, at least not in Sunni Islam. Things like that are more controversial than they need to be, because in some way those arguments seem to threaten established patterns of male authority in Muslim communities.

The way women's rights problems are discussed differs greatly from person to person. Amina Wadud, for example, led a Friday prayer in the United States. Do you think her action is a constructive contribution to the gender equality discourse?

Barlas: This is such a complicated issue. Many people are criticizing her for undertaking this act while there are more urgent issues. Well, why are they not spending their time talking about those issues that are more urgent rather than about the case of Amina Wadud? At least the people who prayed behind her have democratically selected her. The authority of an imam or leader of prayer is not the same as a priest or a pope. Nobody is going to be forced to obey her. An imam can be anybody leading the prayer. If people want to pray behind her, why not? If she is the most knowledgeable Muslim in that room and she can lead the prayer: why not?

An imam of course is not like a pope, but the authority of the ulama is definitely not negligible.

Barlas: Well, we need to challenge the authority of the ulama, because nobody has the right to say that only he knows the meaning of the Quran and only he can define religious meaning. I believe that everybody who condemned those who prayed behind Amina Wadud are wrong, because it is not for anyone of us to determine whose prayer is going to be accepted and whose prayer is not.

Furthermore, there are adult Muslim women who pray behind their six and seven years old sons for no other reasons than that they are male children. Is that not a form of male worship and should we not be talking about those issues? Why are we just so hung up on Amina Wadud? What about the thousands of Muslim women who

pray in their own homes behind little children, just simply because their child is a male? So, for me this controversy needs to be put to rest.

In the Netherlands, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is also fighting for the rights of Muslim women and gender equality. She made a highly controversial film, Submission, together with late Theo van Gogh that directly relates the abuse of women to Quranic texts. What do you think of her contribution to the debate?

Barlas: I think there was more an element of sensationalism in the film and I think Amina Wadud goes much deeper than that, since she fundamentally believes that it is her right as a believing Muslim to stand before a prayer congregation. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is saying that the Quran itself authorizes men to abuse their wives sexually. In my opinion, you cannot be an advocate for Muslim women when you think the Quran is oppressive. Amina Wadud, on the contrary, thinks that the Quran is liberatory and she sees her action as an act of liberation.

Do you think the feminist Islamic discourse will in the future be able to change the conservative Islamic jurisprudence or fiqh?

Barlas: I do not know many female scholars who are actually attacking fiqh from a feminist perspective, so it is hard for me to say whether they will be able to change it. But when ordinary average people begin to see that the shari'a in the form in which it is implemented now is not giving them what the politicians say it is supposed to be given to them, things will change. Unless Muslims as a whole begin to raise certain kinds of question, reform or change is going to be very hard.

In Indonesia there are many people who are calling for an implementation of the Islamic shari'a. Since you have experienced the shari'a yourself in Pakistan, during the Zia ul Haq regime, do you believe shari'a could be introduced and at the same time defend woman rights?

Barlas: From what I have heard and read so far in Indonesia, the shari'a as it is being introduced in Aceh is discriminating against women. Many people are saying it is not providing gender justice. I am of that school of thought which believes that Islamic law is a product of human thinking and that as a product of human thinking it is certainly susceptible to rethinking.

Let us look to Pakistan for example. A blind domestic servant was raped in Pakistan, and the court sanctioned her to be stoned to death. However, stoning to death is not a punishment in the Quran for any crime. Saying that stoning to death is not in the Quran and that it needs to be rethought as a punishment is to say something quite reasonable.

The people (in favor of shari'a, ed.) will then get very upset and they will start quoting hadith and say that they can derive it out of the prophet's practices. Then the conversation goes to another level. Since for me, as a believer, we cannot be one hundred percent sure of every single thing in the hadith, whereas we can be one hundred percent sure of what is in the Quran.

So, this is a kind of circular argument where you cannot pin down your critics. Muslims who defend this kind of Islamic shari'a move from the Quran to the hadith (tradition) and eventually to public reason (ijma'). When you chase them around and tell them the Quran can be read in more than one way they take refuge in hadith.

When you point out hadith is multi-vocal and polyphonic, they say that public reason (ijma') will not admit it, although public reason is a socio-cultural construct. I call this a circle of oppression and it is very difficult for Muslim women to escape from it, because they keep jumping around from topic to topic.

So, you strictly separate between the Quran and the hadith then?

Barlas: Yes, absolutely. For a believer, the Quran is a divine discourse and the hadith are not. Hadith are the result of human compilation and none of the people who compiled them ever claimed they were infallible and the Quran teaches us a theory of human fallibility. Many people who are using the hadith are unhappy with the egalitarianism of the Quran. Whatever the Quran opens up, the hadith can shut down.

In Europe, the Muslim community is very static and does not seem to have a good response to Western ideas and intellectuals who criticize Islam. Do you see more criticism within the Islamic community in the US?

Barlas: I think immigrant communities tend to be conservative. This question needs to be posed not just simply in terms of Islam versus the West, because Islam is in the West and it is part of the West. But it really is a problem of immigrants. The first and second-generation immigrants feel culturally marginalized and peripheral, just like Indonesia, the biggest Muslim country, can feel peripheral in the Muslim world. Take immigrants in France e.g., you have to understand that they are living in an ex-colonizing country and it is not so simple to embrace any idea that comes out of a country that has had a history of colonizing these people.

In addition, some of those immigrant communities tend to be more inward looking and more conservative than they were at home.

I think it is about feeling out of place and turning inward. Unfortunately, the primary victims of that inward-looking mentality are Muslim women. Because it is on the body of Muslim women that all of these cultural battles for meaning get played out: whether you should wear a hijab or not etc. It is a very sad situation because women's bodies are becoming the symbol for the struggle between the ex-colonial powers and these Muslim communities.

The backward position of women in Muslim countries, as you will agree, does not only come from religion but also from culture. Do you think your struggle could resolve in a change in this culture as well?

Barlas: Patriarchy has been around for thousands of years and when the Quran was revealed it mentions people who blindly follow the ways of the fathers. That, to me, is the essential ingredient of patriarchy. I do not think it will easily be dismantled, but as we see in Western society, it has been possible to mitigate some of the harshest aspects of patriarchy. Not just by formal legal rights but also by substantive civil rights and liberties and economic opportunities.

I think cultural change is never going to happen in the absence of political and economical reform. What Muslim societies need, on a macro level, is a new consciousness that emerges out of material circumstances and conditions. These economically backward societies are politically closed societies and many of them are anti-democratic and authoritarian societies.

How can we expect patriarchy to be dismantled in these societies? I think all of these challenges are interlinked and I always argue hermeneutical and existential questions are always connected, because you cannot read text for liberation in utterly depressive societies.

Do you see Islamic reform as the basis or do you think it should start with political and economical reform?

Barlas: I see these processes of being interlinked and see this (Islamic reform, ed.) as one ingredient, but an essential ingredient, because for political and economical reform to take place in Muslim countries it must also be informed by an Islamic ethos. A lot of left-leaning intellectuals have learned over the years that if you do not speak in a language that average ordinary Muslims can identify with, assimilate and understand that you risk not making real changes.

I think that was one of the shortcomings of the socialists and communists in Pakistan. Marx said, religion is the opium of the masses but he also said it is the sigh of the oppressed. These things have to happen simultaneously, which is why the challenge is so great.

Somebody asked me whether my ideas would bring liberation to women and bring democracy. I said no, you cannot just start reading the Quran and then suddenly have democracy. There are repressive institutions that should be dismantled. However, I do believe a fundamental change must happen in the way Muslim relate to the scripture and interpret their religion for there to be a meaningful democracy. I think it is complicated and things have to happen together.

Interview conducted by Novriantoni and Ramy El-Dardiry

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This interview was previously published by the Liberal Islam Network.

Asma Barlas obtained a BA in English Literature and Philosophy and an MA in Journalism from Pakistan, and a Ph. D. in International Studies (from the USA). She has published as a journalist, poet, and short story writer. Her scholarly work includes papers on the Qur'an and Muslim women's rights (published in the Journal of Qur'anic Studies, for example). She has also published two books, most recently "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an (2002).

Born in Pakistan, she was one of the first women to be inducted into the Foreign Service, but was then removed by the military ruler General Zia ul-Haq for her criticism of him. She joined the Muslim, a leading opposition newspaper, as assistant editor. In the mid-1980s she left Pakistan for the USA, where she eventually received political asylum. She is currently Associate Professor of Politics at Ithaca College.

Originally posted at Qantara.de: http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-307/_nr-28/_p-1/i.html.