

Islam and Feminism

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by Asma Barlas

I have been asked to write about how feminism informs my understanding of faith and if and how faith influences my feminist views. I've discussed the intersection between Islam and feminism many times before and every time I have clarified that I do not like to call myself a feminist; yet, the label continues to stick!

The truth is that long before I learned about feminism, I had begun to glimpse a message of sexual equality in the Qur'an. Perhaps this is paradoxical given that all the translations and interpretations that I read growing up were by men and given that I was born and raised in Pakistan, a society that can hardly be considered egalitarian. Yet, the Qur'an's message of equality resonated in the teaching that women and men have been created from a single self and are each other's guides who have the mutual obligation to enjoin what is right and to forbid what is wrong.

But, then, there are those other verses that Muslims read as saying that men are better than women and their guardians and giving men the right to unfettered polygyny and even to beat a recalcitrant wife. To read the Qur'an in my youth was thus to be caught up in a seemingly irresolvable and agonizing dilemma of how to reconcile these two sets of verses not just with one another but also with a view of God as just, consistent, merciful, and above sexual partisanship.

It has taken the better part of my life to resolve this dilemma and it has involved learning (from the discipline of hermeneutics) that language--hence interpretation--is not fixed or transparent and that the meanings of a text change depending on who interprets it and how. From reading Muslim history, on the other hand, I discovered that Qur'anic exegesis became more hostile to women only gradually and as a result of shifts in religious knowledge and methodology as well as in the political priorities of Muslim states. And, from feminism, I got the language to speak about patriarchy and sexual equality. In other words, it was all these universes of knowledge that enabled me to encounter the Qur'an anew and to give voice to my intuition that a God who is beyond sex/ gender has no investment in favoring males or oppressing women either.

Most Muslims, however, are unconvinced by this argument and it may be because viewing God's speech (thus also God) as patriarchal allows the conservatives to justify male privilege and many progressive Muslims to advocate for secularism on the grounds that Islam is oppressive. As for me, I continue to respond to the Qur'an's call to use my reason and intellect to decipher the signs (ayat) of God. Thus far, such an exercise has only brought me to more liberatory understandings of the text itself.

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