Forum

Un-reading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an: Beyond the Binaries of Tradition and Modernity

Asma Barlas

I would like to thank AMSS, and specially Jamin Zine, for inviting me to address your conference on "Islam: Tradition and Modernity" today. Since I am in the midst of enjoying your splendid hospitality, I feel I should begin with an apology for what I am about to say. A polite guest would have praised the food and your conference and gone home without being critical of anything. But unfortunately for you, I was born with an impolitic gene and so I am going to take this opportunity to critique the way in which your conference is framed.

The basic point I will make is a simple one: It is not very productive to study Islam through the lenses of tradition and modernity. This is not because one cannot say anything meaningful about Islam in those two contexts; rather, it is because binary modes of thinking are themselves problematic. I will make this point in two ways: first by critiquing the tradition vs. modernity binary and binaries in general and, second, by sharing my own work on Qur'anic hermeneutics as an example of how we might get beyond binaries. Whether my comments will serve to muddy the waters or to clarify them remains to be seen.

Tradition, Modernity, and Binaries

Personally, I find these seemingly inexhaustible debates about whether or not Islam is compatible with modernity – in other words, whether it can coexist with science, democracy, human rights, pluralism, rationalism, and what have you – somewhat exhausting and increasingly unfruitful. And this may have to do with the fact that I first encountered these debates, albeit in a very different form, in grad school – and that was already some fifteen years ago. At that time, Latin American Dependency Theory was becoming all the rage this side of the border and, as many of you probably know, dependency theory (DT) was a response to modernization theory (MT), which was a response to the political and economic chaos following WWII. Faced with the prospect of massive decolonization and what was seen as an encroaching socialism, United States policymakers and academics fretted about the future of what would one day come to be called the Third World. Their solution, then, as now, was brilliantly simple if also catastrophically simple-minded: Let's bring development and "democracy" to these poor benighted countries!

The argument was that in order for Third World countries to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, the United States needed to pump capital into them so as to modernize their traditional sectors that were keeping them "underdeveloped" and "backward." Heaven knows how many academics, policymakers, and government wallahs built their careers trying to quantify tradition and modernity. To many, it meant capitalizing agriculture; to some, it meant undoing commitments to religion, communal ties, and tradition; and, to others, it meant nothing less than "making men modern."

Then, as now, people in other parts of the world paid the price for this social engineering. And one of the first to do so was Pakistan, my country of birth, that became a playground for the Harvard school, the Chicago boys, and all those gung-ho types in the 1950s. Well, we know how modern Pakistan is today!

By the time I left grad school, the Dependenistas, as they were called, were still giving MT a good drubbing. Their argument, basically, was that the reason the Third World lagged behind the First [World] was not because it was pre-modern or pre-capitalist, but because of the way in which global capitalism had developed. To put it simply, capitalism had underdeveloped one part of the world even as it had overdeveloped the other. In effect, it was not a schizophrenic split between tradition and modernity within Third World countries that explained their "backwardness," but the nature of the global political economy. DT was, of course, ultimately sidelined and, in the

end, did little to undermine the tradition/modernity binary. It simply amped it up to the global level.

Since then, the debates on tradition and modernity have been reframed and, in the intervening years, seem to have been dis-placed and re-mapped onto Islam. The project is no longer to make the Third World modern; it is to make Islam modern. (Of course, not everyone is committed to such a liberatory enterprise; on the flip side, many want to keep Islam in the clutches of so-called tradition.)

One of the good things about grad school is that one gets to leave it, even if only eventually and in a state of utter disillusionment. And, as the years have slipped by, I have discovered another universe outside the confines of graduate work. This process of discovery has involved recognizing the absurdity of trying to shoe-horn Islam into tradition and modernity or, for that matter, trying to shoe-horn tradition and modernity into quantifiable variables. It has also meant figuring out what is wrong with thinking about social reality in terms of binaries.

For one, as Talal Asad demonstrates, tradition and modernity are of a piece and not discrete entities. Moreover, as he argues, when we view the world in binary terms we ignore the political possibilities and "practical options ... opened up or closed by the notion that the world has no significant binary features, that it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, [and] continuously dissolving and emerging social states."[1]

For another thing, as Islamic theology shows, it is not just possible for us to think beyond binaries, but [doing so is] an almost inevitable consequence of embracing the concept of *tawhid*, or the notion of divine indivisibility. As we know, Muslims derive their view of reality from their conception of God and, inasmuch as they believe that God's reality and unity "can be described by opposite and conflicting attributes," they also view the cosmos "as a vast collection of opposites," to quote Sachiko Murata.[2] Crucially, however, Muslims also hold that this collection of opposites actually displays "the activity of the single Principle," and that "opposing forces [are not] absolutely opposed," but, rather, "complementary or polar."

Roger Ames has pointed out that polar explanations yield a "holographic" view of the world that emphasizes "interconnectedness, interdependence, openness, mutuality, indeterminateness, complementarity, correlativity, co-extensiveness, a world in which continuous foci are intrinsically related to each other." In contrast, dualistic theories emphasize separateness and "a world of 'things' characterized by discreteness, finality, closedness, deter-

minateness, independence, a world in which one thing is related to the 'other' extrinsically."[3]

I realize, of course, that I am counter-posing these theories very much in terms of binaries! And, my only defense is what Murata offers: Because we can only get to the distinctiveness of polarity by critiquing duality, binary modes of thinking are useful for defining certain positions, especially in theology. My own position, then, is that we forego a "holographic" view of Islam when we use the tradition/modernity binary to analyze and investigate it.

Moreover, if we situate Islam in the realm of tradition, we implicitly acquiesce in the oppression of women, given that the dominant tradition as it is constructed is both patriarchal and monosemic. Conversely, if we situate it in the realm of modernity, we buy into a teleology in which Islam can only become modern if it makes itself over in the image of Big Western Secular Brother by producing its own Reformation, its own Luthers, its own secularism, its own androcentric humanism.

Of course, these are not the only ways to think about the relationship between Islam, tradition, and modernity. But these are some of the theoretical and political problems with imposing the tradition/modernity binary onto Islam. I want to switch gears now and speak about how a Qur'anic hermeneutics can get us to move beyond dualistic and binary modes of thinking.

Qur'anic Hermeneutics:
Beyond Binaries

Before I do that, however, I should share with you the basic argument of my book, which is that we can read the Qur'an as an anti-patriarchal text. In fact, I make the bolder claim that Qur'anic epistemology is inherently anti-patriarchal. The wonderful Mohammed Arkoun once quizzed me about this, so I should clarify that by *Qur'anic epistemology* I mean a mode of knowledge that stems from our conceptualization of the divine. To me, Qur'anic epistemology is anti-patriarchal because it is based in a view of a God who is neither father nor son nor husband nor man nor male and nor even created. This God is, therefore, beyond affinity with males and hatred for females.

I also believe that Qur'anic epistemology is anti-patriarchal because the Qur'an does not condone or sanction patriarchy either in its traditional or its modern forms. I am defining *traditional patriarchy* as rule by the father/husband and *modern patriarchy* as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males. Not only does the Qur'an not sanction rule by the father or [the] husband, it also does not use biological sex to privilege males. If any-

thing, it establishes the ontic equality of women and men by locating their origins in the same *nafs*, or self.

The method, or hermeneutics, by which I arrive at this reading derives from four principles having to do with theology, methodology, ethics, and authority, which I derive from my understanding of the Qur'an's teachings. The theological principle is that since our understanding of God's word cannot be independent of our understanding of God, we must seek the hermeneutic keys for reading the Qur'an in the nature of God's self-disclosure. For instance, if the Qur'an tells us that God's rule brooks no other rulers or intermediaries, then we should also not read the Qur'an as setting up men as intermediaries between God and women or as rulers over women. (This is just one example, and I am grossly oversimplifying it here.)

Methodologically, I privilege the Qur'an's foundational verses over its allegorical and I read the text as a whole, since the Qur'an warns us against dividing it into "arbitrary parts" or making it "into shreds" (15: 89-93) (reading it selectively or piecemeal).[4]

The third principle is an ethical one and derives from two Qur'anic verses: one in which God instructs Moses to "enjoin your people to hold fast by the best in the precepts" (7:145) and another which says that "Those who listen to the Word and follow the best (meaning) in it ... are the ones whom God has guided" (39:18). The Qur'an itself, then, establishes that not all its readings may be appropriate, places on us the moral responsibility of judging between them, and leaves it to us to define what is "best." This not only shows that revelation is polysemic, but also leaves room open for continual reinterpretation, since our understanding of what is best is historically contingent, hence liable to change. Emphasizing the best also shows that hermeneutic and existential questions are *connected,* since to be able to choose between readings one must have the civil liberties and religious freedom necessary to engage in open debate and dissent, which one cannot do in anti-democratic and repressive societies and communities.

The last aspect of the hermeneutics I am describing has to do with authority and, specifically, with who is authorized to interpret the Qur'an. Historically, of course, only male scholars and socially sanctioned interpretive communities have done so. However, the text itself calls on all believers to use their own intellect and reasoning (*`aql* and *`ilm*) to decipher its *ayat* (verses). Significantly, in the Qur'an, *`aql* and *`ilm* are not a function of scholarship or even of literacy, since the Qur'an says it came also for the unlettered bedouin in the desert. As such, I believe that the authority to interpret the Qur'an derives from the Qur'an itself, not from public sanction or existing structures of interpretive authority. In fact, the structure of Muslim

authority and public reason have effectively closed off the Qur'an to fully half the ummah, namely, women.

Naturally, this is just a simplified outline of my argument, and I shared it with you with the intent of illustrating the irrelevance, if you will, of the tradition vs. modernity binary in producing or understanding work of this sort. By way of a conclusion, I want to draw out this point more explicitly.

Conclusions

In some obvious ways, I am reading the Qur'an in light of modern concepts and language (patriarchal, hermeneutics, equality). But I am [also] trying to recover a Qur'anic episteme that predates these concepts and language. Presumably, this episteme is traditional by virtue of the fact that it is 1,400 years old. So, then, how should I situate my work: within modernity or tradition?

I guess one could say that religion and the very idea of God are traditional; but, then, what about us "moderns" who believe in God? Which part of modernity makes room for our traditionalism, or is it the other way around? And if the idea of God is traditional, is the idea of a God beyond sex/gender and, indeed, beyond representation not modern? On second thought perhaps not, since early Muslim theologians were engaged in trying to rid representations of God of any anthropomorphisms even before we came to call them that!

You might argue that I am using a definition of patriarchy that encompasses both its traditional and its modern forms and that this is an important distinction to make. Fair enough! But since the Qur'an does not support either one, at least in my reading, does that make its stance traditional or modern or both? Then, too, the Qur'an was speaking of issues of contextual legitimacy, polysemy, and textual holism before modern hermeneutics. Does the Qur'an then have a modern sensibility? If so, how did it speak to people in the seventh century?

I could go on, but, I think you have gotten my drift. The point is, here we are today and with us is the Islam that we practice in the midst of modernity or alongside it, though on whose terms and in what forms is not always clear to me. So I am all for interrogating these terms and forms. But I wonder whether doing so in terms of the tradition/modernity binary is actually productive. To the contrary, I have tried to suggest that we close down certain spaces, certain questions, and certain possibilities when we embrace a bipolar view of the world. Particularly at this moment of war between

"Islam and the West," us and them, good and evil, binary thinking smacks too much of an imperialist sensibility.

And, of course, binary modes of thought imprison us in adversarial languages that keep us from imagining an open and "unfinished world"[5] in which we can work to build shared understandings and solidarities. I believe that Muslims can contribute to building such solidarities by envisaging an Islam beyond tradition and modernity, East and West, Self and Other, in order to embrace the inclusive vision inherent in the Qur'an's teachings that at the heart of all creation is diversity, and that the function of diversity is, ultimately, to allow us all to "know one another."

Endnotes

1.   Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 15.
2.   Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 10-12.
3.   Ibid., 10.
4.   Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988), 653. All verses in this article are taken from this source.
5.   Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell, eds. *The Norbert Elias Reader* (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 229.