

Book Review: “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an

Paul Allen Williams

Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182-0265

Barlas, Asma. *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). 254pp. \$21.95 (paper).

Recent historical events have heightened international interest in the politics of Islam and Islamic culture. Among the many areas of interest, the status and treatment of women in majority Muslim nations is prominent. In particular, commentators criticize such practices as female circumcision (frequently called ‘female genital mutilation’), stoning women for adultery, and so-called “honor killings,” in which women are killed by close male relatives. Common rejoinders to such criticisms include the suggestions that many of these practices have a socio-cultural foundation not a religious one, and that women in Islamic nations have had greater rights historically than in majority Christian nations. These assertions and rejoinders regarding the treatment of women is closely linked to ideological (and theological) commitments of the commentators, hence the tone of this debate is heavily loaded, often serving to arouse passions and not to clarify issues.

In the midst of the public debate over these kinds of practices, more fundamental questions about Islam and the role of women in Islam need to be raised in a more productive manner. Such questions include the following: Is Islam inherently patriarchal and misogynistic (as some Muslims and non-Muslims have asserted)? Are there warrants for abusive treatment of women in the *Qur’an*, in the *sunnah* (life and practice) of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the *ahadith* (stories about the life and practice of the prophet), or in the *shari’a* (Islamic law)? If so, what are they? If not, what is the basis for the oppression of women in at least some predominantly Muslim nations? And can the discussion be rooted in language in which men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, participate? Or, are only certain persons privileged to address the questions and the underlying issues?

In a provocative new study, Asma Barlas’ *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* raises precisely these questions. As a Muslim and as a scholar, she addresses a broad audience, including both “Muslims and non-Muslims, women and men, believers and nonbelievers, the non-West and the West” (xiii). With such a broad audience, Barlas endeavors to find language for engaging the complex theological and epistemological

problems inherent in these questions. Nevertheless, she does not shy away from raising sharp questions and asserting her answers incisively. As she states in the opening of the Preface, Barlas’ most fundamental question is “whether or not the Qur’an is a patriarchal text,” and her purpose is both “to challenge oppressive readings of the Qur’an [and] to offer a reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur’an’s teachings, contrary to what both conservative and progressive Muslims believe” (xi).

Chapter One, the introductory chapter on “The Qur’an and Muslim Women: Reading Patriarchy, Reading Liberation,” elaborates the central questions and theses of this work, i.e., whether the Qur’an is a patriarchal text and whether it permits or encourages liberation for women. In examining these questions, the author notes “two definitions of patriarchy (as a tradition of father-rule, and as a politics of gender inequality based in theories of sexual differentiation)” (2). In raising and answering the questions of patriarchy and liberation, she attempts to recover “the liberating and egalitarian voice of Islam” (4) through a reading of the Qur’an based on two claims. First, she opens the door for a non-traditional reading of the Qur’an by asserting, “insofar as all texts are polysemic, they are open to variant readings.” From the latter, she is able to distinguish between the text itself (which is a record of the very words of Allah) and the (various) readings of the text. Second, and contrary to the claims of many Muslims and non-Muslims alike, she claims that, “the Qur’an is egalitarian and antipatriarchal” (5). In order to make the latter claim, the author insists on “recognizing the Qur’an’s textual and thematic holism, and thus the hermeneutic connections between seeming disparate themes” (8), thereby rejecting the tendency to read “patriarchy and sexual inequality into the Qur’an” (7).

Although she is well versed in and directly engages feminist literature and thought and the questions she raises are central to feminist discourse, especially feminist literary and Biblical criticism, she clearly distances herself from Western feminists in a variety of ways. First and foremost, she speaks as a “believing woman,” that is a Muslim woman who grounds her theoretical perspective on the Qur’an as a revelation of God’s will. Thus, she speaks from what she construes to be a “Quranic perspective.” In assuming this perspective, she rejects the idea of a synthesis of Quranic and Western epistemologies (25). In addition, she rejects a deterministic view of the relationship between sex/gender

and reading, arguing that her positions are not specific to the fact that she is a woman (21). In these and other ways, Barlas intentionally distances herself from Western feminists while engaging the literature and ideas of feminism in a sophisticated and nuanced manner.

Chapter Two on “Texts and Textualities” identifies the principal sacred literature of Islam (the Qur’an), as well as the classical interpretive communities (especially the jurists of the classical period, e.g., al-Shafi) and methods, including *tafsir* (exegesis) and the use of *ahadith* (narratives about the life and practice of the Prophet Muhammad) for understanding the Qur’an. Barlas argues for a clear distinction between the *Qur’an* (as the self-revelation of God to the Prophet Muhammad), on the one hand, and the *tafsir*, *ahadith*, and *shari’a*, on the other. This distinction is the basis for a powerful re-evaluation of the relationship between revelation and tradition. She argues that a relatively small group of interpreters during the classical period accorded the *ahadith* a privileged status comparable to the Qur’an, and that this hermeneutical move on the part of those interpreters introduced the elements of the tradition that are most oppressive of women. In addition to examining the development of tradition in the early centuries, Barlas considers the exegetical methods of both conservative and critical theorists in contemporary Islam.

Chapter Three on “Intertextualities, Extratextual Contexts” goes beyond the textual traditions themselves to the interrelationships among texts (intertextuality) and the extratextual context, that is the contexts of reading, especially the political context of state formation and juridical developments during the classical period of Islamic history. (This is the period of the Abbasid Caliphate and the development of the four great schools of law in the Sunni tradition.) Among the issues explored in this chapter, one might note the definition of the prophet’s *sunnah* through the historically problematic *ahadith*, the collaboration between the *ulama* (religious scholars) and the state, and the closing of the gates of *ijtihad* (critical reasoning) in favor of *ijma’* (communal consensus). These contexts demonstrate that there is a relationship between the social and political contexts and the particular moves of authoritative interpreters, and raise the possibility of other readings that may not be consistent with classical tradition.

At the beginning of Part Two, Chapter Four on “The Patriarchal Imaginary of Father/s: Divine Ontology and the Prophets” moves into a closer reading of the text of the Qur’an itself. Although each of the chapters in this book begins with one or more *ayah* (verses) from the Qur’an, it is in Part Two where we begin to hear more fully the richness of Quranic expression. The author’s commitment to a Quranic epistemology leads her to quote the Qur’an in detail, and the novice can learn to listen to the language of the text (in the widely accepted translation by Yusuf Ali). In the midst of this greater use of scriptural texts, Barlas returns again to her central argument, i.e., not only that the Qur’an is not patriarchal, but also that “the teachings of the Qur’an are radically egalitarian and even antipatriarchal”

(93). She relies particularly on an analysis of *tawhid*, the unity of God. The doctrine of *tawhid* rejects associating anything with God, e.g., a spouse or a son. In fact, the Qur’an rejects anthropomorphizing God. The Arabic word for God, “Allah,” literally means “The God” and has no gender attribution.

In addition to this theological analysis, the author considers the role of prophets in the Qur’an. For example, a close reading of Quranic verses regarding Abraham leads to the conclusion that “Abraham begins by rejecting his father’s *gods*, and then his father’s *authority*, calling on his father to follow him instead, challenging the very core of father-right as it is structured in patriarchies” (111, emphasis original). Likewise, Abraham’s submission to God’s will (not association with God’s authority), his designation as a prophet/*imam* (a gender-neutral term etymologically related to the words for community and mother), and the near sacrifice of his unnamed son (who himself accedes to God’s will), all emphasize the authority of God and the rejection of patriarchy, in the sense of father-rule.

Chapter Five on “The Qur’an, Sex/Gender, and Sexuality: Sameness, difference, equality” raises the question of the construction of sex and gender in the Qur’an. The author finds that “both women and men have the same capacity for moral agency, choice, and individuality,” arguing that the Qur’an “does not sexualize moral agency” and that it “appoints women and men each other’s guides and protectors” (140). In her discussion of modesty, she indicates that, “many Muslim men have made a mockery of its [the Qur’an’s] teachings by acquiring harems and contracting serial one-night marriages. . . . [M]any Muslim men have corrupted in the extreme the Qur’anic ideals of temperance and virtue” (157). Among the many controversial issues touched upon, she also takes up the issue of *harth*, meaning “tilth” or property, a term in Ayah 2:223 that has been used to justify men’s control over women’s sexual praxis (161–65).

In Chapter Six, “The Family and Marriage: Retrieving the Qur’an’s Egalitarianism,” Barlas discusses the relationship between “mothers and fathers and wives and husbands.” It is here that men’s responsibility to protect women, the presumed right to ‘wife-beating,’ divorce, and polygyny are taken up in the context of the scriptural tradition. Her clarification of these issues based on her reading (and quoting) of the text goes a long way to undoing the apparent misunderstandings of the meaning of the text on these matters. The reader will have to judge for herself whether or not Barlas has indeed captured more accurately the meaning of the Quran’s message on these matters. Among her conclusions, Barlas asserts that, “We may also find that [the Qur’an] comes closest to articulating sexual relationships in the kind of ‘non-oppositional and non-hierarchical’ mode that many scholars believe can be liberating for both women and men” (202, emphasis original).

The closing “Postscript” recaps the historical and hermeneutic arguments of a book which the author wrote, “in the hope that it will be among those egalitarian and

antipatriarchal readings of Islam that will, in time, come to replace misogynist and patriarchal understandings of it” (209).

Barlas brings a mastery of both Muslim and Western scholarship to her subject, and the clarity and incisiveness of her arguments are a wonderful lesson in creative and principled debate about fundamental issues in Islam. In addition to a model of scholarship, this book is a rich resource for understanding one of the most important and most difficult scriptural traditions. Both complex in its arguments and challenging in its conclusions, this book is not for the faint of heart. In the author’s attempt to be precise and to cite contemporary scholars in detail, there is considerable repetition in the development of her argument requiring perseverance on the part of the reader. Fortunately, Barlas’ skill as a writer more than compensates for the reiteration of key points. In fact, she is able to bring the riches of literary criticism, feminist thought, scriptural studies, Islamic history, and the Qur’an itself into a coherent, if densely argued, text. For traditional and progressive Muslims alike, Barlas’ ar-

gument undercuts certain assumptions about the meaning of the Qur’an and about the relationship between the Qur’an and the *sunnah*; and it also produces a new reading of the text that contradicts commonly held conclusions regarding its intent. Precisely because they are grounded in a close reading of Quranic texts and scholarship, her arguments will be unsettling to those who hold the assumptions she is challenging. Devout Muslims may have difficulty with the distinction she draws between the Qur’an and the *ahadith*, as well as the implications that distinction has for specific practices related to women. For non-Muslims, this book challenges both political and religious conservatives and progressives. Simply to follow her argument, one must learn the vocabulary of Islamic studies. And to give her a fair hearing, most readers will be required to rethink preconceptions regarding both Islam generally and the role of women in Islam in particular. As a “believing woman” herself, Asma Barlas grounds her reading of the Qur’an in the Qur’an, thus providing a valuable perspective on the continuing debates about Islam in the modern world.

