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MUSLIM WOMEN AND SEXUAL OPPRESSION: READING LIBERATION FROM THE QURAN¹

Asma Barlas

*A*t this year's Macalester Roundtable, we are celebrating, and also critically evaluating, divergent perspectives on international feminisms. It is in that context that I have been asked to address some of the central concerns of Muslim women as I perceive them. The open-endedness of both the invitation and the topic seems to make for a relatively easy task; yet this very fact complicates it inasmuch as the discursive richness of the subject and the profusion of approaches to it make it difficult for a single person or perspective to cover it comprehensively, or in a manner that everyone will find equally meaningful. I would like, therefore, to acknowledge from the outset the partial nature of my own account and its particularized appeal.

Muslims today number over a billion people and live in every continent in the world in conditions of enormous political, social, cultural, and—though we are insufficiently attentive to it—religious, diversity. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Muslim women will have different types of concerns depending on where they live and in what conditions. At the same time, however, it is painfully clear that in spite of the diversity of Muslim cultures and societies, women in many societies have to endure similar forms of sexual inequality and discrimination. These range from cultural mores and psychological attitudes that condone bigotry or violence towards women, to laws that refuse to recognize them as legal and moral agents on a par with men, to the restriction or denial of political-economic rights and resources to them relative to men. What is more, discrimination, and even oppression, are often justified by recourse to sacred knowledge or, more accurately, knowledge claiming to derive from religion, including from

Islam's Scripture, the Quran. It is this problem — in feminist terminology of sexual/textual oppression — that I will discuss here. Specifically, I will analyze, and also contest, the tendency to read sexual inequality, oppression, and patriarchy into the Quran. I will argue not only that readings and representations of Islam and the Quran as patriarchal/oppressive rest on a number of errors, but also that the Quran can be read as an *antipatriarchal* text, that is, as *undermining* the fundamental claims of patriarchies. By illustrating the antipatriarchal nature of Quranic epistemology I hope to establish the continuing relevance to Muslims of their Scripture for (re)theorizing women's and men's rights.

Two caveats are in order here. First, I do not wish to suggest that we should (or can) explain Muslim women's oppression or status, "solely in terms of the Quran and/or other Islamic sources all too often taken out of context."² As numerous scholars have pointed out, patriarchal and sexual patterns in Muslim states are a function also of the nature of the state and political-economy, cultural practices that may have nothing to do with Islam, the history of a particular society, women's social class, the choices available to them, etc. Nonetheless, if we take sexual/textual oppression seriously, and I believe we must, the issue of how Muslims read, or — as I will argue — *fail* to read, the Quran becomes critical, especially for women. In this context, secondly, while I am happy to acknowledge my debts to Western feminisms, I must confess that I do not view the project of women's "liberation" itself as being Western or feminist. Rather, I find such a project to be intrinsic to the Quran's teachings, which is why I remain skeptical of relying on Western feminisms and secularism for theorizing women's rights in Muslim societies. In part, then, this essay is also an implicit critique of Western secular feminism.

I begin by explaining my choice of topic and methodology and, since the latter is likely to generate resistance on the part of some readers, by speculating on the nature of their reservations as a way to enable a more open-minded engagement with my work.

I. Why this Topic and Method?

My choice of topic derives from my view that the central problem women face in Muslim societies today is the prevalence of discriminatory and misogynistic practices and ideologies (howsoever defined) which prevent them from realizing their full human potential and, in

some cases, from being able to meet even their most basic needs for survival (as in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan). However, while I am angered by the discrimination and misogyny of Muslim societies, what I want to comment on here is not their persistence *per se*, since there are few, if any, societies that have managed to rid themselves of sexual inequality or hatred for women. Rather, what I find significant, hence worthy of analysis, is the tendency to read misogyny and discrimination *into* Islam, particularly into the Quran. This is evident not only from patriarchal readings of the Quran by so-called "Islamists,"³ but also from Muslim feminist condemnations of Islam's "own misogynist bias"⁴ and of monotheism itself as patriarchal.⁵ I hope to show that such views arise not only from flawed readings of Islam, but also from a flawed epistemology of reading. This argument necessitates first clarifying the relevance of reading/representations to a discussion of Muslim women's oppression and also liberation.

Representations are relevant to such a discussion because, as feminists argue, a society's constructions of "ideal" women also shape its treatment of "real" ones. That is why "our understanding of the problems of 'real' women cannot lie outside the 'imagined' constructs in and through which 'women' emerge as subjects."⁶ It is this relationship between the real and the symbolic that allows feminists to theorize connections between the "literary and the social mistreatment of women,"⁷ and to condemn their "textual harassment."⁸ While not all representations are textual in nature, texts — which are discourses "fixed by writing"⁹ — play a critical role in the process of representation as they do in the process of meaning creation. For instance, reading sacred texts shapes our views not only of God, but also of the nature and roles of women and men, which then can become grounds for justifying sexual hierarchies and inequalities. However, as critical scholars of religion argue, the meanings we ascribe to a text result from the act of *reading*, which is not only interpretive, but also gendered (masculinized)¹⁰ in nature, as is language itself. (It is this intersection between sex/gender and reading/ representation that Toril Moi means to convey by the term sexual/textual.¹¹)

The role of representations and of sacred texts in structuring our social and sexual attitudes and practices, and the interpretive/masculinized nature of reading/representation, makes the issue of *who* reads the Quran and *how* central not only to understanding the problem of sexual inequality and discrimination among Muslims, but also

to theorizing liberation, especially since different readings of the same text can yield “fundamentally different Islams.”¹²

Paradoxically, while Muslim ideas and practices do not always reflect the Quran’s teachings, these teachings (or rather, our interpretations of these teachings) continue to provide role models for real/imagined women; thus, historically, the “most positive women of the Quran, by association, determined the most excellent women of Islam.”¹³ This does not mean, however, that there are no interpretive differences among Muslims about the Quran’s teachings about women or that Muslim constructions of “the female” came “ready-made;” rather, these were “established in an active battle in history, when particular interpretations won out over others.”¹⁴ I have argued at length elsewhere that reasons why certain interpretations of the Quran (hence also of women’s rights) won out over others have to do not with the Quranic *text*, but with the *contexts and methods of its reading(s)*.¹⁵ The fact that the Quran has been read as a patriarchal text (i.e., as a text that privileges males and teaches the precepts of female inferiority and subordination to men), has to do with (a) its readings in/by patriarchies, (b) by means of a conservative method authorized by a handful of male scholars during the Middle Ages, (c) with the backing of the state, which became involved in defining religious knowledge from very early times. That is why an analysis of the extratextual contexts in which Muslims have read the Quran and the methods they have employed to read it (hermeneutics and history *together*) is integral to explaining conservative readings of it today.

If my choice of topic assumes the interconnectedness of the hermeneutic and existential questions — i.e., between how we create religious meaning/knowledge and women’s oppression/ liberation— its treatment is a function largely of my own epistemic stance as a “believing woman,” to use a Quranic term. Briefly, this means that my belief in God, rather than in an androcentric humanism, shapes my approach to knowledge. In fact, insofar as humanism’s man-centeredness has enabled the “Othering” of woman while claiming to liberate both from God, I question its soundness as a framework for theorizing women’s rights even in secular contexts. Second, I regard the Quran as Divine Discourse (God’s Speech) and, in keeping with an old tradition in Muslim theology, distinguish between this Discourse and its “earthly realization.”¹⁶ Thus, what I question is not the Quran but its oppressive *interpretations*, and the sacrilegious idea that only some of us (males) can know its real meaning, claims implicit in confusing the

Quran with its exegesis. Finally, while recognizing both the influence of gender on reading and the masculinist nature of Scriptural exegesis (in every religion, not just Islam), I also hold that reading is a function not only of *who* reads (sex/gender), but also of *how* (method). I thus never rule out the possibility that men, no less than women, can read for liberation and that a mutually shared discourse of meaning and care among believing women and men therefore is possible. Indeed, as the Quran teaches, it is essential if we are to develop moral individualities and communities.

To speak from these vantage points—i.e., to speak as a Muslim in a secular society that is not invested positively in religion, to say nothing of Islam—is to speak from a position that is doubly precarious and likely to encounter *a priori* resistance. Thus, while readers may be aware of the ways in which my being a Muslim is integral to my argument, they may be less aware of the extent to which their own reactions and resistance to it may arise from their recognition of this fact. In speculating on the nature of this resistance, I am assuming that uncovering the preexisting biases we bring into the process of interpretation renders it more productive.

II. Resisting my Argument

The people most likely to be *a priori* resistant to my argument will be those who think of Islam as a patriarchal religion and who hold that only fundamentalists or apologists can conceivably defend it. Such people, however, ignore not only the interpretive/masculinized nature of reading, but also the fact that *every* text has multiple meanings and that there are always disjunctures between theory and practice, i.e., between what a religion teaches and how we practice it. (Certainly Muslim practices are not always congruent with the Quran's teachings, as I will argue in Section III). Some resistance to my argument may also stem from the fact that the dominant discourses on Islam, particularly as exemplified by the media, still remain within narrowly essentialist confines that discourage viewpoints favorable to it. The secular suspicion and, indeed, hostility toward religion may also lead some people to assume that—as I have been told by otherwise discerning colleagues—one cannot be both a believer and an intellectual, but must choose between them. That is, the lack of belief in God or, better yet, belief in the lack of God—i.e., a complete “absence of doubt”¹⁷ about the Divine—qualifies one to be an intellectual! This

faith/reason binary — which was not always natural to Western thought — may make some sense in the light of specific White/Western readings of, and experiences with, Christianity; the Crusades, the “Holy Inquisition,” and colonialism come readily to mind. However, the Quran teaches us not to pit faith against reason by affirming that we can only come to know God by exercising our intellect/reason (*aql*), and by acquiring knowledge (*ilm*). *Aql* and *ilm* are therefore the foundation of both Faith and hermeneutic rationality in Islam, which is why Muslims like me feel no qualms in defining ourselves as believing intellectuals.

Finally, those people may also find some of my claims unsettling who consider Judaism, Christianity, and Islam or, alternatively, the West/non-West, to be so radically different as to belong to “wholly different” categories, in the memorable words of an old Orientalist. Such views manifest themselves in the customary tendency to co-opt Judaism and Christianity into the rubric of “Western” religions while consigning Islam to the category of “Eastern/Other,” a process of misnaming that ignores the Middle Eastern origins and scripturally linked nature of all three faiths and the commonality of some of their truth-claims. To assume a shared humanity or truth-claims, however, is to threaten the “West’s” notions of its own specificity and the hyperseparation many people here wish to retain between themselves and their “Barbaric Others.”¹⁸ Yet, I remain optimistic that awareness of such obstacles to understanding is the first step in transcending them.

III. Representing Islam as Patriarchal

Patriarchal readings of the Quran, as well as representations of Islam as patriarchal, are not unrelated, but I examine them separately in the interest of clarity. It might make more sense to begin by discussing Muslim readings of the Quran since, presumably, it is a patriarchal exegesis that fosters repressive practices and thus also representations of Islam as oppressive. I will, however, begin with the latter because readers are likely to be more familiar with them and also because it will allow me to dispel some misconceptions about Islam early on in my essay.

Representations of Islam and monotheism as “patriarchal,” though popular, can be faulted on at least three counts. First, they rest on a simple but grievous methodological confusion between a religion/sacred text and a particular, patriarchal, *reading* of it; i.e., they

confuse Divine Discourse with its exegesis (and Islam with Muslims). The fact that it is feminists who use such representations is ironic given that it is feminists who have been the first to theorize the gendered nature of representation, reading, and language itself, in conditions of actually existing patriarchy. Confusing a sacred text/religion with a specific reading of it also ignores the hermeneutic principle of textual polysemy; that is, the fact that all texts are open to multiple and even oppositional readings since every text has multiple meanings. However, if we can read every text in multiple modes, how can we reasonably insist that the Quran alone can be read in only one, or have just one set of (patriarchal, sexist) meanings? To insist that it does is to put oneself in the same league as the so-called “fundamentalists” who also claim interpretive privilege by implying Scriptural monosemy (the false idea that the Quran has only “x” meaning which only *they* know). Not only feminist, but also hermeneutic, epistemology thus demands that we distinguish between a text and its mis/readings, as Muslim theology has done from earliest times. However, just because we can read a text differently does not mean that every reading is equally legitimate. Indeed, the task of hermeneutics—defined variously as the philosophy, method, and critique of interpretation—is to enable judgments about con/textual legitimacy. (For Muslims, the insight that not all readings of it may be right originates in the Quran itself; see Section V.)

Representations of Islam as patriarchal are also ahistorical. As a cursory reading of history reveals, even the *forms* that discrimination and misogyny have acquired among Muslims are not unique to them. Rather, ideas of female inferiority and male privilege, veiling and segregating women, polygyny, wife-beating, etc., were customary among the ancient Greeks and even in societies with goddess cults. Feminists themselves have traced the processes by which ancient misogynistic beliefs and practices percolated into Jewish, Christian, and eventually Muslim religious traditions thereby distorting them. For instance, Leila Ahmed¹⁹ shows how “preexisting” misogyny was incorporated “seamlessly” into Islam during the Middle Ages, shaping Muslim discourses on women and gender in years to come. Barbara Stowasser,²⁰ on the other hand, details the role of Muslim exegetes (many of them Christian and Jewish converts) in introducing into Islam ideas originating in Biblical traditions by way of their exegesis (interpretation) of the Quran (*tafsir*), and the narratives recording the life and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Ahadith). As a result, the Quran’s teachings are

overlaid by an exegesis that often misrepresents them in fundamental ways. For instance, the secondary religious texts assert that Eve was created from Adam's rib (as a way to establish a "hierarchy of being"²¹ based on its temporalization), and that she brought about the Fall, a sin for which all women are said to have been punished by painful childbirth and menstruation. In contrast, the Quran teaches that creation originated in a single *nafs* (feminine plural for self); it does not state that man (Adam is a generic name for human) was created before woman, or that she was a product of his body, or that she was responsible for the Fall. Indeed, there is no concept in Islam of the Fall, which is based on Biblical temporalizations of the rift between God and humans and incarnates the moment of their mutual rupture and alienation.²² In Islam, on the other hand, God's expulsion of humans from Paradise also opens up the possibility for them to receive immeasurably of God's Mercy. Nor does the Quran treat childbirth or menstruation as punishments for women or for designating them inferior to men or as inherently unclean. Similarly, the Muslim tendency to deny "female rationality and female moral responsibility" also derives from "Bible-related traditions,"²³ and contradicts the Quran's definition of women and men as equally responsible moral agents. In the same vein, Muslim representations of certain women figures in the Quran is also "achieved by way of adaptation of Bible-related lore"²⁴ rather than by adherence to the Quran's own teachings.

That we accept such repressive traditions and practices as Islamic is, I believe, less a commentary on Islam than it is on our own misreadings of it, and on our shared history as Muslims and non-Muslims/Westerners. In the latter context, an argument can be made that the persistence of many anti-women traditions in Muslim societies is a legacy not only of a flawed Scriptural exegesis, but also of latter-day encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim/Western civilizations. In other words, if the interface between both during the "Middle Ages" explains the *essentially similar* nature of misogyny and discrimination in them at that point in time, the modern enterprise of Western colonialism may explain the persistence and *specificity* of misogyny and discrimination in Muslim societies today. To simplify a complex argument: Western colonialism, which came, it said, to liberate us from our cultural and religious heritage, actually occasioned the reentrenchment of many practices and symbols (notably, the veil) which Muslims came to see as markers of their identities, hence *differences* from the West. In the process, the pre/anti-Islamic and oppressive nature of

many of these symbols and practices was elided. Ironically, then, both the *assimilation* of non-Muslim/Western ideas and customs into Islam and attempts to *resist assimilation* may explain many of the transmutations and distortions that exist within Islam today.

I make these points not to exonerate Muslims or to put all the blame on the “Western/ outsider” for the ills of Muslim societies, but in the interest of historical accuracy, and to dispel certain fallacies about Islam. One is that Muslim exegesis of the Quran reflects its teachings accurately, as do Muslim practices, such that if sexual oppression exists in Muslim societies, it must be because Islam sanctions it. (The fact that Muslim patriarchies historically have been oppressive and have misrepresented their own oppressive practices as Islamic naturally lends credence to such views.) Another misconception is that Western civilization has had no hand in shaping the sexual/social practices of the Islamic world, a myth sustained by representations of “Islam” and “the West” as mutually exclusive and hermetically sealed universes totally segregated from one another.

Yet, there are limits to using history (or the West) as alibis for explaining Muslim women’s oppression, which I view also, and largely, as resulting from Muslim misreadings of the Quran.

IV. Reading Inequality and Oppression into the Quran

Most anti-women ideas among Muslims, as well as practices like female circumcision and stoning to death for adultery, predate Islam and do not originate in, nor are they endorsed by, the Quran. But this does not mean that Muslims have not derived theories of inequality and male privilege from the Quran. Specifically, its different treatment of women and men with respect to marriage (especially polygyny), divorce, evidence, inheritance, etc., and a couple of lines in the text (“men have a degree above women,” and “men are in charge of the affairs of women [in that] God has preferred them”), are all read as establishing the Quran’s advocacy of sexual inequality and patriarchy. However, there are a number of problems with such readings.

First, even feminists (who do not always agree on what sexual equality is) now agree that “(s)imple equality principles have...proven inadequate for feminist practice,” especially in the “area of sexuality.”²⁵ Moreover, a growing literature suggests that treating women and men *differently* does not in itself amount to treating them *unequally*, particularly if differences in treatment are not premised in claims about sexual

(biological) differentiation.²⁶ The Quran's different treatment of women and men is not, in fact, premised in such claims (see Section V); rather, it is a function of the rights and responsibilities of individuals in a given situation. For instance, a brother inherits twice the share of his sister from their parents' property (and a mother twice that of a father from the property of their children), but this unequal division has to be seen in the context of the fact that husbands, not wives (even if independently wealthy), have been charged with the responsibility of maintaining their families. Likewise, the Quran's stipulation that two women, in place of one man, can serve as witnesses to the transaction of a debt, does not mean that it regards the woman's testimony as being half a man's, as Muslim patriarchies hold. In the far more consequential matter of adultery, when a husband accuses his wife but is unable to produce four witnesses to the fact, the Quran gives greater weight to the wife's testimony on her own behalf than the husband's against her. If she swears her innocence, he can have no further legal recourse against her. Similarly, although the Quran permits polygyny in certain cases, it is not because it privileges *males* but, strange as it may sound to us today, because it wishes to ensure justice for the most vulnerable women in society: the orphans.

Give the orphans their property, and do not
exchange the corrupt for the good [i.e., your
worthless things for their good ones]; and devour
not their property with your property; surely
that is a great crime.

If you fear that you will not act justly
towards the orphans, marry such women
as seem good to you, two, three, four;
*but if you fear you will not be equitable,
then only one, [aw] what your right hands own
so it is likelier you will not be partial.*²⁷

These verses are said to have been revealed after a battle in which many Muslim men lost their lives and many women were left as widows and orphans. It is the Quran's desire to protect these women, left without support in a predatory /tribal/patriarchal society, that fuels its sanction for polygyny which is, nonetheless, made contingent on three criteria: it is restricted to *orphans*, its purpose is to ensure *justice* for them, and it is *not right* if it results in injustice to the *wife*. That injustice may be inherent in a polygynous situation is clear not only from the

last line of this verse, but also from another verse which warns men that “you will not be able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager.”²⁸ Yet another verse reminds men that “God has not made for any man two hearts,” implying that a man cannot love two women equally.²⁹ Together, then, these verses can be read as presenting a case *against* polygyny, which is never presented as catering to men’s sexual needs or as a universal male prerogative.

Misrepresentations of the Quran’s position on polygyny reveal another problem with patriarchal readings: their tendency to quote selectively from the Quran, thereby distorting and, in some cases, subverting its intent and teachings. For instance, the claim that the Quran establishes males as superior to women derives from misreading a reference to a husband’s rights in a divorce:

Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses. And it is not lawful for them that they conceal that which Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And [(the rights) due to the women are similar to (the rights) against them, (or responsibilities they owe) with regard to] the *ma’ruf* (kindness) and men have a *darajah* (degree) above them (feminine plural). Allah is Mighty, Wise.³⁰

Read in context, the degree refers not to men’s rights in general, or to their biological or ontological status as males, but to the husband’s right either (a) to divorce his wife without outside arbitration (the wife requires such arbitration even though the Quran does not stipulate it, as Wadud notes), or (b) to *rescind* a divorce.³¹ Since the Quran mentions kindness and reconciliation in the same verse, the latter seems to be a more plausible reading.

Similarly, the claim that God has preferred men to women and made them rulers over women arises from reading only parts of a verse and from misinterpreting three words in it:

Men are [*qawwamuna ’ala*] women [on the basis] of what Allah has [preferred] (*faddala*) some of them over others, and [on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are [*qanitat*], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [*nushuz*] admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them.³²

The primary meaning of *qawwamun* is financial maintainer, not ruler, argue Wadud and Azizah al-Hibri. The verse is thus charging husbands with the responsibility of maintaining women in those cases where they have a larger share in inheritance than the women (in which some of them have been preferred), and they are supporting women from it.³³ Since men can only be “‘*qawwamun*’ over women in matters where God gave *some* of the men more than *some* of the women, *and* in what the men spend of their money, then clearly men as a class are not ‘*qawwamun*’ over women as a *class*,” concludes al-Hibri.³⁴ In addition, Wadud’s analysis of the words “*qanitat*” and “*nushuz*” show why they need not be read as referring to the wife’s conduct *vis-à-vis* her husband or as justifying his abuse of her.³⁵

Other examples illustrate that Muslims read inequality and even oppression into the Quran by generalizing what is specific in it and by decontextualizing it.³⁶ Yet, in the end, a patriarchal exegesis results not only from a flawed hermeneutics, but also from a flawed *theology*.

V. Reading Liberation from the Quran

A liberatory hermeneutics of the Quran and a liberatory theology must begin by recognizing that, since there is perfect congruence between Divine Ontology and Divine Discourse, we need to connect God to God’s Speech by making “*God’s Self-Disclosure the hermeneutic site from which to read the Quran.*”³⁷ That is, since God’s Speech and God’s Being as described in the Quran (God’s Self-Disclosure) are congruent, we need to base our exegesis of one in our understanding of the other. Thus far in my work, I have explored the exegetical implications of only three of God’s attributes out of the ninety-nine named in the Quran — God’s Unity, Justness, and Inimitability — which I will summarize very briefly.

The attribute of God’s Unity or Oneness (*Tawhid*) stipulates that God’s Sovereignty/Rule are Indivisible (cannot be shared with others) and no one can claim any form of rule/sovereignty that either alleges to be coterminous with God’s Rule, or conflicts with it. Inasmuch as theories of male privilege do both—by drawing parallels between God and fathers/husbands, misrepresenting males as intermediaries between women and God, or as rulers over women and thus entitled to their obedience — they violate the concept of *Tawhid* and must be rejected as un-Quranic. The attribute of God’s Justice, on the other hand, maintains that though “severe, strict and unrelenting” in justice,

God “never does any *zulm* to anybody.”³⁸ In other words, God does not “act in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person,”³⁹ which is the meaning of *zulm* employed in the Quran. Even if we define *zulm* differently, we cannot regard inequality, discrimination, and hatred as *not* being *zulm*. To the extent that patriarchy is based in all three, it can be said to constitute a manifest case of *zulm* and we must assume, again as a *hermeneutic principle*, that the Quran cannot condone it. An exegesis that alleges to the contrary should be rejected as a misreading inasmuch as it attributes *zulm* to God. Finally, the doctrine of God’s Incomparability, which states that God is Unrepresentable, encourages us to reject God’s engenderment, even at a linguistic level (“He”). This is crucial since misrepresentations of God as Father/male also underwrite sexual hierarchies and oppression in religious contexts.

In addition to God’s Self-Disclosure, the Quran also provides hermeneutic keys for reading it, in its support for the principles of textual holism, con/textual legitimacy, and analytical reasoning. The Quran’s recognition of its own textual/thematic unity is clear from its warning *not* to break it “into parts,⁴⁰ or to “change the words/From their (right) places/ And forget a good part of the Message.”⁴¹ It is also clear from the Quran’s praise for those who recognize that *all* of it is from God, i.e., those who view it as a *totality*. That not every reading of it may be appropriate emerges from the Quran’s approval of those “who listen to the Word and follow the best (meaning) in it,”⁴² and its criticism of those who focus only on its “allegorical [verses]/ Seeking discord, and searching/ For its hidden meanings.”⁴³ (While we may hesitate on the issue of the best meaning of every verse, we cannot regard a reading which imputes *zulm*/injustice to the Quran as the best, for reasons I have suggested.) The Quran also distinguishes between itself and its (mis)readings by condemning those “who write/ The Book with their own hands,/ And then say: ‘This is from God.’”⁴⁴ Indeed, the Quran is insistent that “those who are bent on denying the truth attribute their own lying inventions to God.”⁴⁵ While this is a reference to the hypocrites of the Prophet’s time, I believe it serves also as a warning to exegetes. Finally, the Quran urges believers to use their own *aql* (intelligence, reasoning) to decipher God’s signs for themselves while condemning anchorites and priests for leading people away from God (which may be why the Quran does not sanction a clergy that can claim interpretive privilege).

The Quran's auto-hermeneutics is sophisticated and complex and I have outlined it here in barest detail in order to show why it can generate an antipatriarchal exegesis. However, to establish the Quran as an antipatriarchal, or even as a *patriarchal*, text, we need to define patriarchy itself, which no reader of the Quran has done. In my own reading, I work with both a narrow and a broad definition so as to make it as comprehensive as possible. On the one hand, I define patriarchy as "a historically specific mode of rule by fathers/males that, in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real/symbolic continuum between the "Father/fathers," i.e., between a patriarchal view of God as Father/male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband's claim to rule over his wife."⁴⁶ On the other hand, I also define patriarchy as a politics of male privilege and sexual differentiation which equates sex with gender and "prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other.'"⁴⁷ However, whether we use the specific or the general definition of patriarchy, we cannot find support for it in the Quran; indeed, its teachings *challenge* the central claims of *both*.

Thus, not only does the Quran repudiate the patriarchal construct of God as Father, but it also condemns sacralizations of prophets as fathers. It also characterizes the rule of fathers ("following the ways of our fathers") as being antithetical to God's Rule. In fact, one of Islam's most radical moves against patriarchy is to *displace* the rule of father/husband in favor of God's Rule. This emerges not only from the Quran's relentless denunciations, in dozens of verses and contexts, of the rule of *unbelieving* fathers, but also from its treatment of *believing* fathers as illustrated by the lives of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad.⁴⁸ Thus, Abraham's break with his own father and his vision, first to sacrifice his son and then not to, all illustrate this displacement of the father's will/rule by God's Will/Rule. On the one hand, God approves of Abraham's break with his unbelieving father and also saves him from the latter's punishment, establishing the legitimacy of disobedience to unbelieving fathers and of obedience to a Merciful God. On the other hand, however, God also *curtails* Abraham's rights as father *twice*: once by giving him the vision to sacrifice his son—which can only proceed in the Quran when the son himself freely consents to it, indicating that it is not simply a question of Abraham exercising unquestioned patriarchal authority—and then in commanding Abraham not to proceed with the sacrifice, establishing the primacy of God's Will/Rule over the rights of even believing fathers.

Indeed, it is a believing father's "*willingness to submit his will to God's Will; i.e., to yield up his rights as father/man*" that establishes him as a believer, as Abraham's narrative illustrates.⁴⁹ Similarly, in spite of the fact that the Quran describes the Prophet Muhammad as being "closer" to believers than their "own selves,"⁵⁰ it also declares that "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but the Messenger of God and the seal of Prophets."⁵¹ While this verse is read as clarifying the Prophet's relationship to his adopted son, it is significant for its refusal to sacralize the Prophet as real/symbolic father, showing yet again the Quran's abiding resistance to the patriarchal paradigm of the Father/fathers. This resistance illustrates a cardinal tenet of Islamic monotheism: the primacy and inviolability of God's Rights/Rule, which holds that submission to God, not fathers (patriarchy in the traditional sense), defines moral agency. It is for the same reason that the Quran does not valorize husbands as rulers/guardians over women, or as heads of households.⁵²

Although many feminists condemn Islam's "uncompromising monotheism," it is this very inflexibility about the primacy of God's Rule that opens up possibilities for radical equality for women inasmuch as God's Rule is *not based in the idea of sexual differentiation, hence in a theory of sexual inequality*. That is, while the Quran recognizes sexual (biological) differences, it does not assign sex/biology or sexual/biological difference symbolic or normative value. It does not link sex with gender. Consequently, the Quran does not teach what Thomas Laqueur calls "a biology of sexual incommensurability,"⁵³ i.e., the notion "that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these 'facts.'"⁵⁴ This "two-sex model," which is at the core of modern Westernized misogyny, assumes that biological differences between males and females, hence between men and women, render them "different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect."⁵⁵ The tendency to ascribe "psycho-social distinctions" between women and men to biological differences⁵⁶ is common not just to "patriarchal religions" (monotheism), as feminists charge, but also to Western secularism, which also claims that women's biology renders them deficient in morality and reasoning.⁵⁷ At the heart of this claim is not only the confusion of sex (biology) with gender (its social constructions), but also the tendency to theorize sexual difference in terms not of "(pure) difference but in terms of dichotomous opposition or distinction; not, that

is, as contraries ('A' and 'B'), but as contradictories ('A' and 'not-A')."⁵⁸ The difference, explains Elizabeth Grosz, is that "in relations governed by pure difference, each term is defined by all the others; there can be no privileged term which somehow dispenses with its (constitutive) structuring and value in relations to other terms." In contrast, distinctions and binary oppositions result when one term nonreciprocally defines "the other as its negative. The presence and absence of *one* term defines *both* positions in the dichotomy" (her emphases). It is, says Grosz, this second notion of difference, as binary opposition, that characterizes phallogocentric thought. Arguably, however, it is not only the idea of sexual difference as exemplified by the two-sex model that is phallogocentric, but also the idea of sexual *sameness* exemplified by the "one-sex" model associated with the ancient Greeks. In this model, women and men were arranged "according to their degree of metaphysical perfection;" thus, to be "a man or a woman . . . was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes."⁵⁹ Yet, in spite of its view of sex as a sociological rather than an ontological category, this model also establishes man as the Self ('A') and woman as the Other (lesser 'A'). Elements of both models persist in modern patriarchal discourses in which the woman is "absence, negativity, the dark continent, or at best a lesser man."⁶⁰ In other words, woman is both *difference* and a *lack*.

The Quran, however, does not espouse a view of sexual difference or sameness that coheres with either the one-sex or the two-sex model. As Wadud says, it "does not consider woman a type of man in the presentation of its major themes. Man and woman are two categories of the human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same or equal potential."⁶¹ In effect, the Quran's teachings on human ontology, agency, and subjectivity, show that women and men constitute part of a single totality — that of sexual/sexed pair — in which it is not the biological sex of either partner, or the specific nature of their sexuality, that is important, but the nature/quality of their moral *praxis*. In other words, the only criteria for distinguishing between humans in the Quran are ethical-moral, not sexual: "O [human]! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct."⁶² To clarify:

morally purposeful action in accordance with Quranic teachings and not sexual identity, defines human agency and subjectivity in Islam. Not only does the Quran make no claims about sexual sameness or difference that portray women as lesser or defective men or the two sexes as incompatible, unequal, or incommensurable, in the tradition of Western/ized patriarchal thought, but — unlike the latter — it also does not equate sex with given social meanings (gender), or assign specific attributes to either sex.⁶³

That is, the Quran does not define women and men in terms of sex/gender attributes, much less in terms of binary oppositions; e.g., man as logical, woman as illogical; man as intelligent, woman as emotional; man as the Self, woman as the Other. In fact, inasmuch as humans commence from a single Self in the Quran, there is no real or symbolic Other. Moreover, in the Quran's definition of the human pair, neither half is privileged, as is clear from the Quran's teachings on a whole array of issues ranging from marital relations to moral personality to sexual modesty.

In keeping with its view of women and men as equal moral agents, the Quran holds them both to the same standards of moral behavior and promises them the same reward for righteousness:

For Muslim men and women,—
For believing men and women,
For devout men and women,
For men and women who are
Patient and constant, for men
And women who humble themselves,
For men and women who give
In charity, for men and women
Who fast (and deny themselves).
For men and women who
Guard their chastity, and
For men and women who
Engage much in God's praise
For them has God prepared
Forgiveness and great reward.⁶⁴

That the Quran regards women and men as being equally responsible moral agents is clear not only from this verse but also from the fact that

the Quran designates believing women and men as each other's *awliya*, i.e., mutual protectors, or mutually "in charge" of one another:

The Believers, men
And women, are [*awliya*],
One of another: they enjoin
What is just, and forbid
What is evil: they observe
Regular prayers, practise
Regular charity, and obey
God and [God's] Apostle.
On them will God pour
[God's] Mercy: for God
Is Exalted in power, Wise.⁶⁵

The Quran does not distinguish between the moral-ethical behavior and potential of women and men, and it also does not distinguish between their work. It does not define women and men in terms of a specific social or sexual division of labor, or label work women's work or men's work. This is why it is difficult—if we keep the totality of its teachings in mind—to view its different treatment of women and men with respect to some issues as evidence of its support for sexual inequality. On the contrary, the Quran teaches us a radically egalitarian view of the equal worth and dignity of women that remains unparalleled, even in modern thought.⁶⁶

Finally, as some of the verses quoted above make clear, the Quran is rare among Scriptures in addressing women directly. How this came about is significant for women. Tradition records that when the Quran was being revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, his wife Umm Salama questioned why it was not addressing women *directly*. (Her question seems to have been prompted in part by the Quran's mode of address and in part by its language.) And that, we learn, is how the Quran came to address women *as women*. This episode (which shows that some women were critical thinkers a millennium and a half ago) reveals the importance of language in shaping human subjectivities while also underscoring its limitations as a medium for Divine Speech. If language did not matter, or if language were perfect, presumably God would not have responded to Umm Salama's question by modifying the Quran's mode of address and making women the *subjects* of Divine Discourse, rather than its *objects*, as they are in patriarchal discourses. Indeed, God's responsiveness to

women's concerns is reflected not only in the *language* of Divine Discourse, but also in its *content*, which God shaped in light of women's concerns as they themselves articulated these during the process of its revelation.⁶⁷ Second and more crucially, Umm Salama's question and God's rejoinder to it confirm that in Islam women's relationship with God is direct and unmediated and extends to being able to ask questions about, and of, divine speech itself. That is why I believe that if we continue to ask the right sorts of questions of it the Quran can continue to speak to us today.

VI. An Epilogue

From the absence of valorizations of fathers/husbands (and, indeed, from the Quran's condemnations of such valorizations) as well as from the absence of sex/gender as a meaningful category in the Quran—and from the Quran's insistence on treating women and men as two equal halves of a single pair in which neither is privileged—I am led to conclude that Quranic epistemology is inherently antipatriarchal. In fact, the Quran provides some of the clearest arguments against patriarchy and discrimination in addition to espousing a radically egalitarian view of equality. That is why I believe that movements struggling for women's rights in Muslim societies have the best defense of their cause in the Quran itself. As it happens, Muslim patriarchs try to discredit such movements by branding them "Western/feminist," implying that there is no room to contest patriarchy and sexual inequality from within the fold of Islam. However, one can, in fact, challenge both from within Islam. Yet, as it also happens, many educated Muslim women are unwilling to do so. For one reason, it seems inconceivable to a woman who has been oppressed all her life in the name of the Father and the Scripture that she can read the same Scripture for liberation. For another, many educated Muslim women also tend to confuse Islam with the so-called "Islamists," with whom rational discourse seems impossible. And, of course, there remains the critical issue of the *contexts* in which Muslims today are obliged to read the Quran. Patriarchal and, for the most part, repressive societies, with well entrenched interpretive communities and states jealous of their monopoly on religious knowledge, are unlikely to countenance readings that undermine their own privileges, as antipatriarchal readings are sure to do eventually. Struggles for equality, however, have always exacted a price and the price Muslim women are being asked to pay in

order to reclaim their sacred text and their right to read it anew seems modest given how much hinges on retrieving what Leila Ahmed has called the “egalitarian” voice of Islam.⁶⁸ This is the voice I have tried to show of the Quran, which is why a liberatory Quranic hermeneutics appears to me to be essential to the project of Muslim women’s liberation today.

VII. Responding to my Respondents⁶⁹

I feel singularly fortunate to have had Laura Luitje and Linda Schulte-Sasse as my respondents and find their disparate, if always critical, readings of my essay provocative and energizing. (I have left the main portion of my essay more or less unchanged from the version that Luitje and Schulte-Sasse read, so that readers know what they are responding to.) Since the only thing common to both responses is an equally careful engagement with my essay, I will answer them separately. This will also allow me to draw out the nature and significance of these divergent assessments of my work.

Luitje’s critique is remarkable as much for its thoughtfulness as for the fact that it is grounded in a concerted attempt to engage my work in terms of its own truth-claims and framework, hence on its own terms. This strikes me as extraordinary, as does the fact that Luitje quite self-consciously set out to change the nature of her own foreknowledge of Islam and Muslims as part of the process of engagement by studying some of the same scholars I draw on. As a result, she is able to provide not only an internal critique of my paper, but also an invaluable contextualization of it by emphasizing the rich diversity of scholarship on the Quran, the evolving nature of Quranic exegesis, and the role of cultural differences in shaping Muslim interpretations (and practices) of Islam.

Even as Luitje provides readers a context to understand the specificity of my arguments, she also—gently—takes me to task for having excluded from my analysis the voice of gender hierarchy in Islam to which Leila Ahmed refers. She also questions my equation of patriarchy with *zulm*, rightly pointing out that since most people view patriarchy as universal and “natural,” they are unlikely to share my definition of it as a form of *zulm* against women. Isn’t it hubris, she asks further, to suggest that there has been something quite misguided about Muslim readings of Islam for a millennium and a half?

Yet, eventually, Luitje is concerned not only with such philosophical niceties but also with real-life issues: how can Muslims revise gender roles? Won't people resist egalitarian readings of the Quran? Can there be a meaningful dialogue between Muslim feminists and the standard-bearers of patriarchy? These questions reveal real anxiety that the issue of Muslim women's rights not just remain at the level of theoretical discussions. I just could not appreciate anything more!

It will, perhaps, not come as too much of a surprise to Luitje to know that I do grapple with these questions in that absent presence, my book, to which I refer a number of times in this essay. For instance, I admit that my primary aim is to recuperate the other, egalitarian voice of Islam since this is the voice we have become least accustomed to hearing and the voice we most need to recover if we are to develop a praxis of liberation for Muslim women. The fact that this voice has so completely disappeared from Muslim religious discourses and consciousnesses so as to require explanation and defense today — i.e., its very silencing — suggests to me that something has gone terribly wrong with how we have interpreted the Quran over the last several centuries. This does seem like an enormous, and enormously conceited, claim to make but, in spite of the uniqueness of the vantage point from which I make it, the claim itself is not unique to me. It is made regularly by both conservative Muslims—whose remedial strategy is to “go back” to Islam as practiced by, and in the times of, the Prophet—and by reformists who have sought throughout history to re-vision religious knowledge as it existed at particular moments in time. Thus, few believing Muslims, of whatever persuasion, consider the Islam we practice today as entirely in tune with its real teachings or spirit. Of course, we could all be deluded, or we could be acknowledging the simple truth that, as W.C. Smith puts it, “to reduce what Islam is, conceptually, to what Islam has been, historically, or is in the process of becoming... would be to fail to recognise its religious quality: the relationship to the divine; the transcendent element. Indeed, Islamic truth must necessarily transcend Islamic actuality.”¹⁷⁰ To view Islam as the embodiment of Divine Truth thus does not rule out the possibility for Muslims to recognize that our apprehension and actualization of this Truth may be neither exhaustive nor entirely unproblematic, and may need continued revision.

It is in this context that I have argued that our understanding of Islam depends on how we interpret the Quran. But, how the Quran (or any other text, for that matter) speaks to us depends also on how we

ourselves speak to it. We cannot read it as a liberatory text if we do not ask specifically directed questions of it about sexual equality and patriarchy, questions which the medieval Muslim scholars whose works we regard as canonical today, did not—could not—ask given what they did not know about sexual oppression and equality, biology and its social constructions, the (gendered/interpretive) nature of reading/language, etc. (This does not mean, of course, that no one has ever asked the right sorts of questions of the Quran before; indeed, I gave the example of Umm Salama, but, unfortunately for Muslims, she remains a rare example.)

Asking new questions and questioning accepted interpretations is part not only of our evolving knowledge of Islam, but also of the development of Western science, no less than of Western religions, both of which have been contingent on questioning existing practices and paradigms—no matter how extended or hallowed—as witnessed by the scientific revolutions, the Protestant Reformation, and the advent of multiple interpretations of Jewish identity.

The real issue at hand, then, is not whether we should question interpretations of Islam—since we already do—but the terms on which we should do so. For conservative Muslims, as Luitje points out, such questioning does not include and may, in fact, preclude new readings of the Quran, or a revisioning of the Sharia (Muslim law), or opening up the Ahadith (records of the Prophet's life) to critical scrutiny. For Muslims interested in evolving a liberatory praxis, it seems unavoidable to do all three. This does not mean we want to get rid of all aspects of the Sharia, or the Ahadith; rather, we want to bring them more into conformity with anti-oppressive readings of the Quran. Can these two groups of Muslims come to a shared interpretation of religious knowledge and even have a dialogue? I am not sure. Even so, I remain sanguine—and hope I have also convinced some readers—that a Quranic hermeneutics of liberation is crucial for challenging the ideological/theological roots of sexual oppression in Muslim societies.

That I have, in fact, managed to convince not only Luitje but also Schulte-Sasse (who approaches my work from the opposite end of the spectrum) of the significance of such a project seems clear from her response, which says to me that we may disagree on practically everything, but not on the need for me to do what I am doing. Unlike Luitje, Schulte-Sasse doesn't have to respect what I believe in order to respect my right to believe in it. Her response perhaps best exemplifies the

easy tolerance of postmodern secularism. How, one may ask, could one possibly cavil at a liberality that allows Schulte-Sasse to support my right to defend something she doesn't believe in and even considers — rather good-naturedly — illusory (a benign God, “the” Truth)? Yet, it is her very willingness to defend something she doesn't believe in — or to put it more accurately, to defend the intent of my reading while taking issue with its content — that makes me wonder if it is not the mere act of reading that matters to Schulte-Sasse, and whether there is much point in responding to her critique of its content. Does the very liberality of her support foreclose the need for clarification and further conversation? Having reached such an impasse herself, and having chosen to press on, Schulte-Sasse reveals herself to be less of a postmodern liberal than she seems. After all, by her own reckoning, a true liberal would have ended the conversation by respecting my right to do what I am doing. Yet, she does choose to engage the content of my reading, even if on her own terms and terrain (which is why I regard her critique as an external one). So, even though I suspect that our conversation is not meant to foster agreement, I also opt to continue it, in the spirit of the Quran's advice to reason with one's critics in the best possible way.

To me, the most significant point Schulte-Sasse makes is a methodological one: a reading strategy like mine, she says, uses critical theory to establish the “unfixability of meaning” only to end up positing an “ultimate meaning” by, in my case, designating the Quran as “the Truth.” This “discursive switch,” she argues, shuts down my argument rather than opening it up, in the manner of critical theories. I should point out, however, that it is not by means of a discursive switch, or by relying on critical theories, that I establish the Quran's status as the Truth (for me); rather, I embrace that as an *a priori* epistemological and theological assumption. Can I still have a conversation with those who do not agree with my views? Schulte-Sasse's response itself suggests that I can.

I will not pursue the question of whether Schulte-Sasse and I could really understand each other if meaning were, in fact, completely unfixable. Rather, I will ask why we should confuse the “undecidability” or unfixability of meaning with an absence of truth. To Muslims, it does not follow that if we cannot “fix” the Quran's meanings (partly because its polysemy allows us to render each verse in many ways; according to the sufi Al-Ghazali, perhaps as many as 60,000) that the Quran therefore is not the Truth. For Muslims, the undecidability or

multiplicity of meaning is not a function of content, or of truth-claims, but of hermeneutics. And it is because hermeneutics alone is insufficient to yield an ethical perspective on the truth that I base my reading of the Quran in certain epistemic claims about God's Being.

It may be a similar confusion of Truth with the methods of its appropriations that also leads Schulte-Sasse to ask if we can, in fact, "separate the message from its medium" (as I do when I critique not the Quran but its misreadings), and consider one perfect and the other flawed. In effect, can we assume Divine Discourse to be pure when its interpretations cannot be, given the very nature of language? (Of course, Schulte-Sasse expects *me* to be able to understand *her*, irrespective of the problematic nature of language!) I believe we can assume Divine Discourse to be pure and its interpretations not pure by assuming Divine Infallibility and human fallibility (but we would also need to view God, not "man," as the ultimate locus of knowledge and Truth). To believers, there is nothing illogical about claiming that we can know God only in our own imperfections, but that our imperfections do not in any way reflect on God. Thus, our flawed and incomplete understanding of Divine Discourse does not render the Discourse itself flawed or incomplete. If this answer does not engage Schulte-Sasse, let me raise questions that may. If we do not distinguish between the message and its medium, we then also give up the idea of misreadings inasmuch as the text then *becomes* its (mis)readings. But, could we then generate better readings? Could Jewish and Christian feminists, for instance, ever hope to recover the liberatory aspects of the Bible? Could we even judge between good or bad translations or interpretations of, say, Marx? Alternatively, would a bad reading be taken as signifying a bad original? Would bad deconstruction illegitimize deconstruction as a reading strategy? If we treat sacred texts as being divorced from social practices, as Schulte-Sasse's reading of Lessing suggests — it's not the ring, but the search for it that's the point, they say, though I doubt the latter would make much sense in the absence of the former — then such questions are moot. But, for those who view the relationship between text and context to be interconnected and thus utterly consequential, they can hardly be.

Then there is Schulte-Sasse's observation that to establish the Quran as anti-oppressive to women is not to establish it as antipatriarchal, with which I agree. Moreover, not only does she show that many of my assumptions are infused with patriarchy, but she also concedes her own complicity with patriarchy in her role of teacher. But I thought I

was trying to establish the Quran as anti-oppressive because it is antipatriarchal! I thought I made it clear that for me patriarchy is not a voluntarily inhabitable subject-position, or power imbalance, or even a vaguely defined gender privilege. If it is, let's give up any hope of ever being able to contest it! Rather, it is a specific mode of sexual politics and sexual differentiation that is based in andronormativity (to coin, if it does not already exist, an unhappy term for the unhappy practice of regarding man as normative). In terms of *these* definitions, the mere exercise of power by women does not reconstruct them as patriarchs.

Finally, Schulte-Sasse's critique of Islam's definition of moral agency as voluntary submission to God as both paradoxical (to Westerners schooled in individualist ideology) and socially irresponsible, is perhaps the most disturbing to me. The paradox is easily resolved: do not Western ideas of the social contract, that fabulous imaginary, assume that people voluntarily accept certain limits and restraints as the precondition of freedom? Granted this does not involve submitting to God, but it does invoke that same bizarre idea of self-restraint, self-limits, and self-discipline that Muslims also invoke when they theorize agency and freedom as voluntary submission. Anything forced does not qualify as agency or freedom, much less Faith, given the Quran's warnings to avoid compulsion and excesses in religion.

And what about Derrida's and Kirkegaard's critique of the Abrahamic narrative of sacrifice as illustrating that moral subjectivity and social responsibility are incompatible, even as one subverts the other? I wonder if the debased view at the heart of this critique of both Abraham and Abraham's God results from an anthropomorphic idea of God (as sadistic, or capricious), or whether the binary between morality and responsibility originates in the interiorization (by Christianity) of the idea of a mutual rift between God and "man" as embodied in the trope of the Fall, which institutionalizes human alienation from God.⁷¹ If so, I can only clarify that Muslims do not believe in the Fall nor in the idea of human alienation from God; nor do we adhere to frivolous ideas of God. And here, alas, my Faith in the Real and Absolute must come into conflict with the reality and absoluteness of Schulte-Sasse's lack of it. I am thus left to ponder this Quranic verse:

Say: o ye
That reject Faith!
I worship not that
Which ye worship.

And I will not worship
That which ye have been
Wont to worship.
Nor will ye worship
That which I worship.
To you be your Way,
And to me mine.⁷²

To some, this verse may suggest that it is my religious intolerance rather than Schulte-Sasse's liberal tolerance of the idea of the ultimate nonexistence of truth—which renders God superfluous as its source—that puts closure to our conversation. But, this time I would like to say that would be too easy. To me, this verse does not so much end conversation as it clarifies the terms on which a real dialogue can occur. I read it as suggesting that while we have the right to believe in different truths, the *content* of our truths does matter to how, and how deeply, we can actually converse. Where the content of our belief systems is absolutely different—even if only in the absolutes in which we believe (my conviction in the existence of Truth, Schulte-Sasse's conviction in its nonexistence)—there must eventually come a parting of ways. One of liberalism's dilemmas is that, while enabling this parting, it does not want to accept its existential implications. It thus continues to foster the illusion that tolerance of difference constitutes respect for it.

Lest I leave readers with the impression that, prior to coming to this point of parting, I have not benefited from my conversation with Schulte-Sasse, I hope that my response will affirm otherwise. She, no less than Luitje, has pushed me, albeit in different ways and to different ends, to develop and refine my ideas and arguments. So perhaps there is more opportunity here for a conversation between liberals and non-liberals, the religious and the irreligious, than such binaries lead us to believe. Now, whether this exchange remains “mere conversation,” to quote the immortal Paulo Freire, or becomes a dialogue, is a rather different question. ●

Notes

1. This essay attempts to summarize the argument of my book manuscript, *Gender, Patriarchy, and the Quran* (University of Texas Press, 2002). Readers who find some aspects of my argument here incomplete may benefit from reading the manuscript. The three English translations of the Quran I have used are accepted by Muslims as being the best: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, Inc., 1988); A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Allen

and Unwin, 1955); and Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980). Citations from the Quran are in brackets; the first number refers to the chapter and the second to the verse.

2. el-Sohl and Mabro 1994, p. 1.

3. The words "Islamist" and "fundamentalist" are highly problematic; the first is like calling a Jew a Judaist, while the second comes out of a specifically Christian experience.

4. Hussain 1994.

5. Millett 1980.

6. Rajan 1993, p. 10.

7. Showalter 1992, p. 74.

8. Jacobus in Showalter 1992.

9. Ricoeur 1981, p. 145.

10. Simply imputing gender to reading does not say anything about the reading and, indeed, when feminists refer to the gendered nature of reading, they are referring to its masculinized character.

11. Toril Moi 1985.

12. Leila Ahmed 1992, p. 71.

13. Spellberg 1994, p. 193.

14. Combs-Schilling 1989, p. 88.

15. Barlas 2002.

16. van Ess 1996, p. 189.

17. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968); Freire ascribes this quote to the journalist Marcio Moreira Alves.

18. Sardar et. al. 1993.

19. Leila Ahmed 1992.

20. Barbara Stowasser 1994.

21. Margaret Hodgson, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964). Hodgson shows how temporalization creates (racial) hierarchies.

22. Nieuwenhuijze 1997.

23. Stowasser 1994, pp. 28, 41.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

25. Miles 1996, p. 49.

26. Hekman 1990 and Keddie 1996.

27. The reference to what men's "right hands own" is taken to mean war captives, concubines, and slaves, all of whom were customary in seventh century tribal Arab society (to which the Quran was revealed). However, Muhammad Asad (1980: 519; footnote 3) translates "aw" not as "or," but as "that is." In his reading, the reference here is to women whom men's right hands possess, that is, their *spouses*.

28. 4:1; in Arberry 1955, p. 100; my emphasis.

29. 4:125; in Arberry, p. 119.

30. 33:4; in Ali 1988, p. 1102.

31. 2:228; in Wadud 1999, p. 68.
32. Asad 1980.
33. 4:34; in Wadud 1999, p. 70.
34. Barlas 2002; p. 18.
35. Wadud, p. 71; her emphasis.
36. See Wadud and Barlas for why the Quran's reference to "scourge" was a *restriction* on a prevalent practice, not an invitation to spousal abuse.
37. Barlas 2002.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 32; emphasis in original.
39. Izutsu 1964, pp. 77, 129.
40. Izutsu 1959, p. 152.
41. 15:91; in Ali 1988, p. 194.
42. 5:14; in Ali 1988, p. 245.
43. 39:18; in Ali, p. 1241.
44. 3:7; in Ali, p. 123.
45. 2:79; in Ali 1988, p. 38.
46. 5:05; in Asad 1980, p. 166.
47. Barlas 2002, p. 27.
48. Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), p. 90. In her later work, Eisenstein concedes that difference does not mean inequality. See *The Female Body and the Law* (California: University of California Press, 1988).
49. See Barlas 2002 for a detailed discussion.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 169; emphasis in original.
51. 33:6; in Ali 1988, p. 1104.
52. 33:40; in Ali 1988, p. 1119.
53. Barlas 2002.
54. Thomas Laqueur 1990, p. 196.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
57. Millett 1970, p. 26.
58. Hewitt 1995.
59. Grosz 1990, p. 124.
60. Laqueur 1990, pp. 5, 8.
61. Moi 1985, pp. 133–34.
62. Wadud 1999, p. 15.
63. 49:13.
64. Barlas 2002, p. 189.
65. 33:35; in Ali 1988, pp. 116–117.
66. 9:71; in Ali 1988, p. 461.

67. See Barlas 2002 for a fuller discussion.

68. Ibid.

69. Leila Ahmed 1992.

70. This is my response to Laura Luitje's and Linda Schulte-Sasse's responses to my essay; it is best read *after* reading both of their responses in the pages that follow.

71. W.C. Smith 1981, p. 30.

72. See C.A.O. Nieuwenhuijze, *Paradise Lost: Reflections on the Struggle for Authenticity in the Middle East* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

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