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"Believing Women" in Islam

Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān

by Asma Barlas



University of Texas Press, Austin

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Preface

The central question I have posed in this book, whether or not the Qur'ān is a patriarchal text, is perhaps not a meaningful one from the Qur'ān's perspective since its teachings are not framed in terms of the claims made by either traditional or modern patriarchies. However, since the Qur'ān was revealed in/to an existing patriarchy and has been interpreted by adherents of patriarchies ever since, Muslim women have a stake in challenging its patriarchal exegesis.

In writing this book, I have wanted not only to challenge oppressive readings of the Qur'ān but also to offer a reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur'ān's teachings, contrary to what both conservative and progressive Muslims believe. I am always disheartened to hear progressive Muslims claim, (dis)ingenuously, it seems to me, that "Islamism is Islamism," as a young Algerian feminist puts it in a critically acclaimed film shown recently in the West. To identify Islam inseparably with oppression is to ignore the reality of misreadings of the sacred text. Every religion is open to variant readings; the Christianity of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Conquest that wiped out millions of people in the name of Christ and commerce bears little family resemblance to the liberation theology of today. Confusing Islam with "Islamism" or "Islamists" also ignores that Islam does not sanction a clergy, or invest anyone with the right to monopolize religious meaning. To accept the authority of any group and then to resign oneself to its misreadings of Islam not only makes one complicit in the continued abuse of Islam and the abuse of women in the name of Islam, but it also means losing the battle over meaning without even fighting it, as Abdullahi An-Naim (1990) reminds us.

This is not to say that attempts to rethink our understanding of Islam or to reread the Qur'ān are going to be easy, given the control over reli-

gious knowledge of obscurantists and experts alike. Yet, more and more Muslims, realizing that "no one has a monopoly over the meaning of what God says," as Aref Ali Nayed (1992) puts it, are beginning to reclaim their interpretive rights. In fact, the struggle to reclaim such rights may be related proportionally to attempts by some Muslim states and clerics to keep Muslims from reading, a true irony for a people who believe that Revelation to the unlettered Prophet commenced with the single word "*Iqra'!*" or "Read!"

Although the practice of Islam concerns only Muslims, Muslim practices are of concern to the community of nations in which we live. I have thus written this work with both Muslims and non-Muslims in mind. Writing for such different audiences in a shared vocabulary has proven hard to do, not because I could not always find the right words, but because so many people are invested in the myth of radical difference; that is, the false but comforting idea that they share absolutely nothing with Others. To speak to such people simultaneously and in the same language is to threaten in some very real way the imagined borders that serve as the markers of their identities; it is thus to call forth unrelenting animosity against oneself, as I have discovered over the years.

To conservative Muslims, terms like antipatriarchal, sexual inequality, liberation, and even hermeneutics—all of which I use liberally—smack too much of the epistemology of non-Muslim Others to be safely applied to themselves, let alone used in reading the Qur'ān. Consequently, even though I engage Western/feminist thought only circumspectly, and often to differentiate and privilege what I take to be a Qur'ānic viewpoint, my language and the mere act of engagement are likely to render me a "Western feminist" in the eyes of those Muslims who are prone to hearing in such language, and in any criticism of Muslim men, the subversive voices of Western feminists. Mislabeling Muslim women in this way not only denies the specificity, autonomy, and creativity of their thought, but it also suggests, falsely, that there is no room from within Islam to contest inequality or patriarchy.

Conversely, to feminists and non-Muslim Westerners, terms like liberatory and antipatriarchal are much too self-referential to be applied to, or used meaningfully by, Others, especially Muslims. My use of these terms for the Qur'ān, as also my favorable reading of it in comparison with Western/feminist discourses, will doubtless render me a "Muslim apologist" in their eyes. To such people, it is inconceivable that Islam (usually labeled "Other/Eastern") has any truths to offer that may be commensurable with

Judaism and Christianity (considered "Western"), much less with insights claimed by secular feminisms. Such views, however, ignore the scripturally linked nature and Middle Eastern origin of all three religions, hence the commonality of some of their truth claims. In positing a hyperseparation between Islam and the West, they also ignore that counterposing Islam to the West is misleading in that Islam is a way of life and not an "imagined geography," to borrow Edward Said's (1979) rich phrase; it cannot therefore meaningfully be compared to one. Further, Islam not only exists within the West but also has helped to constitute the West, as Said so compellingly demonstrated two decades ago.

What, then, of my own tendency to refer to "the West" and "Western"? In spite of initial reluctance, I have chosen to retain such terms because of their usefulness in providing descriptive access to an unhappy reality: the asymmetric relationship between a self-defined West and a Western-defined Other (Islam, non-West). It is this process of naming, with its attendant material consequences, that I wish to convey rather than to suggest that the West is absolute, monolithic, or always exclusive of Islam. Nonetheless, if such terms disturb some of my readers, I ask them to read beyond them to get at my intent, which is to address Muslims and non-Muslims, women and men, believers and nonbelievers, the non-West and the West, in a broadly shared discourse of meanings. Toward that end and in the interest of facilitating access by non-Arabic speaking readers to my work, I have relied on a simplified version of the Library of Congress system of transliterations. (The glossary, beginning on page 235, may also be helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with Arabic words.)

CHAPTER 1

The Qur'ān and Muslim Women
Reading Patriarchy, Reading Liberation

It was not God who wronged them,
but they wronged their own souls.

The Qur'ān (30:9) [1]

This work reflects my ongoing engagement with two questions that have both theoretical significance and real-life consequences for Muslims, especially women: First, does Islam's Scripture, the Qur'ān, teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression? Is it, as critics allege, a patriarchal and even sexist and misogynistic text? Intimately related to that question is the second: Does the Qur'ān permit and encourage liberation for women?

When I ask whether the Qur'ān is a patriarchal or misogynistic text, I am asking whether it represents God as Father/male or teaches that God has a special relationship with males or that males embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful. Further, does it teach that rule by the father/husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule, as religious and traditional [2] patriarchies claim?

Alternatively, does the Qur'ān advocate gender differentiation, dualisms, or inequality on the basis of sexual (biological) differences between women and men? In other words, does it privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treat man as the Self (normative) and woman as the Other, or view women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do?

When I ask whether we can read the Qur'ān for liberation, I am asking whether its teachings about God as well as about human creation, ontology, sexuality, and marital relationships challenge sexual inequality and patriarchy. Alternatively, do the teachings of the Qur'ān allow us to theorize the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men?

It is obvious that much is at stake for Muslims in how we answer these questions, especially in view of the increasing levels of violence against women in many states from Afghanistan to Algeria today. What is less obvious—given the widespread tendency to blame Islam for oppressing Muslims rather than blaming Muslims for misreading Islam[3]—is the possibility that we can answer the first set of questions—is the Qur'ān a patriarchal or misogynistic text—in the negative, while we answer the second—can the Qur'ān be a source for women's liberation—in the affirmative. Using an interpretive methodology, or hermeneutics,[4] derived from the Qur'ān, as well as two definitions of patriarchy (as a tradition of father-rule, and as a politics of gender inequality based in theories of sexual differentiation),[5] I hope to show not only that the Qur'ān's epistemology is inherently antipatriarchal but that it also allows us to theorize the radical equality of the sexes.

This book, then, is as much a critique of sexual/textual[6] oppression in Muslim societies as it is a concerted attempt to recover what Leila Ahmed (1992) calls the "stubbornly egalitarian" voice of Islam and to locate it as a legitimate countervoice to the authoritarian voice of Islam about which we hear so much these days, especially in the Western media. If, as Ahmed says, these "fundamentally different Islams" arise in different readings, then it is imperative to challenge the authoritarian and patriarchal readings of Islam that are profoundly affecting the lives and future of Muslim women.

This is not to say, however, that sexual inequality and discrimination are a function merely of misogynistic readings of Islam, or that one can explain the status of Muslim women "solely in terms of the Qur'an and/or other Islamic sources all too often taken out of context" (El-Sohl and Mabro 1994, 1). As many recent studies reveal, women's status and roles in Muslim societies, as well as patriarchal structures and gender relationships, are a function of multiple factors, most of which have nothing to do with religion. The history of Western civilization should tell us that there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality, or patriarchy. And yet, all three often are justified by Muslim states and clerics in the name of Islam. This recourse to sacred knowledge—or, more accurately, knowledge that claims to derive from religion—to justify sexual oppression, and the resulting misassociation of the sacred with misogyny, motivates my own engagement with Qur'ānic hermeneutics and, I believe, renders such an engagement imperative, even unavoidable, to all projects of Muslim women's (and men's) liberation.

Even though a Qur'ānic hermeneutics cannot by itself put an end

to patriarchal, authoritarian, and undemocratic regimes and practices, it nonetheless remains crucial for various reasons. First, hermeneutic and existential questions are ineluctably *connected.* As the concept of sexual/textual oppression suggests, there is a relationship between what we read texts to be saying and how we think about and treat real women. This insight, though associated with feminists because of their work on reading and representation, is at the core of revelation albeit in the form of the reverse premise: that there is a relationship between reading (sacred texts) and liberation. If this were not the case, there would be little point in God's communicating with us in order to reform us. Accordingly, if we wish to ensure Muslim women their rights, we not only need to contest readings of the Qur'ān that justify the abuse and degradation of women, we also need to establish the legitimacy of liberatory readings. Even if such readings do not succeed in effecting a radical change in Muslim societies, it is safe to say that no meaningful change can occur in these societies that does not derive its legitimacy from the Qur'ān's teachings, a lesson secular Muslims everywhere are having to learn to their own detriment.

However, even though Muslim women directly experience the consequences of oppressive misreadings of religious texts, few question their legitimacy and fewer still have explored the liberatory aspects of the Qur'ān's teachings.[7] Yet, without doing so, they cannot contest the association, falsely constructed by misreading Scripture, between the sacred and sexual oppression. This association serves as the strongest argument for inequality and discrimination among Muslims since many people either have not read the Qur'ān or accept its patriarchal exegesis unquestioningly. However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, inequality and discrimination derive not from the teachings of the Qur'ān but from the secondary religious texts, the *Tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis) and the *Ahādith* (s. *hadīth*) (narratives purportedly detailing the life and praxis of the Prophet Muhammad). As such, by

> returning to a fresh and immediate interpretation of the Holy Book, and by taking a new and critical look at the Hadiths—in other words, by engaging in creative ijtihad[8]—modern Islamic authority could very well reform and renew the position of Islam on the issue of the status of women. (Stowasser 1984, 38)

A reinterpretation of the Scripture is particularly important because the Qur'ān's teachings provide Muslims with role models for both women and

men. Since different readings of the Qur'ān (and of other texts) can yield what are for women "fundamentally different Islams," it becomes crucial for them "to reinvestigate the normative religious texts"[9] and even to become specialists in the sacred text, as Fatima Mernissi (1986) urges.

Finally, as theorists argue in other contexts, there is "no practice without a theory,"[10] and Muslims have yet to derive a theory of equality from the Qur'ān. This is partly because, as Fazlur Rahman (1982, 2) points out, Muslims have yet to resolve "basic questions of method and hermeneutics." Every new reading of the Qur'ān, by helping to resolve these basic questions of hermeneutics, can also help to generate such a theory. That is why critiquing the methods by which Muslims produce religious meaning and rereading the Qur'ān for liberation are crucial for ensuring sexual equality.

In attempting to do both here, I concentrate on recovering the liberating and egalitarian voice of Islam that is rarely heard today but which we are most in need of hearing. In the rest of the chapter, I explain my arguments regarding the reading of the Qur'ān; how Muslims read sexual inequality and patriarchy into it; how we can read the Qur'ān for liberation; my epistemology and methodology; and, finally, the plan of this book.

1. Reading the Qur'ān

Those who read Islam as a misogynistic and "uncompromising and overtly paternalistic" religion (Hussain 1994, 118) point both to the Qur'ān's alleged advocacy of sexual inequality and to the long history of discrimination against women in most Muslim societies. My purpose here is not to deny that the Qur'ān can be read in patriarchal modes (as privileging males), that oppressive practices in many Muslim societies often stem from an uncritical adherence to what are assumed to be Islamic norms and strictures, or that the images of "the woman" in the Muslim unconscious are indeed misogynistic.[11] Nor do I deny that "the enveloping maleness"[12] of Muslim religious text engenders grave problems for women, as does the legalization of sexual inequality by classical Muslim law, the *Sharī'ah*. Rather, I argue that descriptions of Islam as a religious patriarchy that allegedly has "God on its side"[13] confuse the Qur'ān with a specific *reading* of it, ignoring that all texts, including the Qur'ān, can be read in multiple modes, including egalitarian ones. Moreover, patriarchal readings of Islam collapse the Qur'ān with its exegesis (Divine Discourse[14] with "its earthly realization"[15]); God with the languages used to speak about God (the Signified with the signifier); and

normative Islam with historical Islam.[16] Thus, Islam and Muslims are confused on the one hand, and texts, cultures, and histories are collapsed on the other. My purpose is both to critique the methods by which Muslims generate patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān and to recover the egalitarian aspects of Qur'ānic epistemology. I do this on the basis of two claims, whose substantiation provides the subject matter of the two parts of this book.

My first and relatively simple claim is that, insofar as all texts are polysemic, they are open to variant readings. We cannot therefore look to a text alone to explain why people have read it in a particular mode or why they tend to favor one reading of it over another. This is especially true of a sacred text like the Qur'ān which "has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and then been continually recontextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors" (Arkoun 1994, 5). We need, therefore, to examine who has read the Qur'ān historically, how they have read it—that is, how they have chosen to define the epistemology and methodology of meaning, hence certain ways of knowing (the realm of hermeneutics)—and the extratextual contexts in which they have read it. In particular, we need to examine the roles of Muslim interpretive communities and states (the realm of sexual politics) in shaping religious knowledge and authority in ways that enabled patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān. I address these issues, which impinge on the power and politics of reading itself, in Part I of the book.

If emphasizing the Qur'ān's textual polysemy allows me to argue against interpretive reductionism, however, it merely reiterates modern definitions of the text and also a well-known historical fact; it says nothing specific about the Qur'ān itself. And I do want to make a more specific, if also more controversial, claim (in dialogue with recent Muslim and feminist scholarship)[17] which is that the Qur'ān is egalitarian and antipatriarchal. This, of course, is a harder claim to establish for at least two reasons. First, while there is no universally shared definition of sexual equality, there is a pervasive (and oftentimes perverse) tendency to view differences as evidence of inequality. In light of this view, the Qur'ān's different treatment of women and men with respect to certain issues (marriage, divorce, giving of evidence, etc.) is seen as manifest proof of its anti-equality stance and its patriarchal nature. However, I argue against this view on the grounds both that (as many feminists themselves now admit) treating women and men differently does not always amount to treating them unequally, nor does treating them identically necessarily mean treating them equally.[18] Second, as my

reading will show, the Qur'ān's different treatment of women and men is not based in claims about either sexual difference or sameness that theories of sexual inequality and oppression make.

Another difficulty with claiming that the Qur'ān is egalitarian and anti-patriarchal is that some of its teachings, especially those dealing with polygyny and "wife beating," suggest otherwise, as does the fact that the Qur'ān recognizes men as the locus of power and authority in actually existing patriarchies. However, recognizing the existence of a patriarchy, or addressing one, is not the same as advocating it. Moreover, the Qur'ān's provisions about polygyny, "wife beating," and so forth—which have been open to serious misinterpretation—were in the nature of *restrictions,* not a license. However, we can only address these types of issues if, in addition to questioning the textual strategies Muslims have used to read the Qur'ān, we also keep in mind the historical context of its revelation in a seventh-century (Arab) tribal patriarchy (much like the Taliban in Afghanistan today).[19] Contextualizing the Qur'ān's teachings (i.e., explaining them with reference to the immediate audience and social conditions to which they were addressed), shows that, far from being oppressive, they were profoundly egalitarian; it depends on how we position the Qur'ān and also ourselves vis-à-vis it historically.

If this line of reasoning suggests that the meanings we derive from, or ascribe to, the Qur'ān are unfixable,[20] or are fixable only in the context of a given historical period or hermeneutic method, it does not mean that we can never know the Qur'ān's meanings or intent, or that all the meanings we derive from it are equally legitimate. Nor does it mean that the Qur'ān is not universal in its scope, or that its teachings were egalitarian only by the standards of a seventh-century society and are irredeemably oppressive by ours. On the contrary, I will contest each of these propositions on the basis both of a hermeneutic argument and by reading (in Part II) the Qur'ān's teachings on a wide range of issues, extending from the nature of Divine Self-Disclosure (how God defines God), to the Qur'ān's view of prophets, parents, spouses, human creation, moral agency, sex/gender, and sexuality. My reading draws on hermeneutic principles suggested by the Qur'ān for its own interpretation, as well as on a comprehensive definition of patriarchy; it also is based in conceptual distinctions that Muslims who read the Qur'ān as a patriarchal text usually fail to make. Prior to specifying my own approach, however, I would like to discuss how Muslims and their critics read patriarchy, inequality, and even misogyny into the Qur'ān.

11. Reading Patriarchy

They treat men's oppression
As if it were the Wrath
Of God!

The Qur'ān (29:10) [21]

Muslims read patriarchy and sexual inequality into the Qur'ān on the basis both of specific verses (*Āyāt,* s. *Āyah*) and of the Qur'ān's different treatment of women and men with regard to such issues as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. From these, they infer that men and women are not only biologically different but also unequal, and are opposites, a view mirrored in the claim that in Islam the masculine and the feminine principles also are strictly separated. On the readings of conservatives,[22] male superiority is both ontological, since woman is said to have been created from/after man and for his pleasure, and moral-social, since God is alleged to have preferred men in "the completeness of mental ability, good counsel, complete power in the performance of duties and the carrying out of (divine) commands." [23] God also is said to have given men a "degree" above women and to have appointed them guardians (in some accounts, rulers) over women. The woman, on the other hand, is represented as a "tragic being [whose] sex functions and physiology make her unfit for any work or activity except child-bearing," which is her "biological tragedy" (Maududi in Khan 1983, 21). Not only do biological and mental functions and capacities differentiate the two sexes, argue conservatives, but they also justify a sexual division of labor in which women must submit to the man "who is responsible for the maintenance of this system be he her husband, father or brother" (61–62). On conservative views, it is clear that

> The Book of Nature, the sciences and the philosophers of Europe have emphatically proclaimed that though woman may try her best . . . she cannot be the equal of man in physical and intellectual powers. . . . Her natural functions oblige her to be subjected to man, by which alone she can have any meaningful identity. (Vajidi in Khan, 129)

Surpassing the audacity even of Europeans like Freud, some conservative Muslims label a woman's anatomy her "pre-destiny," claiming that nature itself "has given man superiority over woman" and made her redundant to civilization (Vajidi in Khan, 173).

Such misogynistic readings of Islam derive not from the Qur'ān's teachings, however, but from attempts by Muslim exegetes and Qur'ān commentators "to legitimise actual usage of their own day by interpreting it in great detail into the Holy Book."[24] In fact, one can trace changes in Muslim women's status "through a comparative study of [Qur'ānic] interpretations such as those of Tabari (d. 923), Zamakhshari (d. 1144), Baydawi (d. 1286) . . . al-Suyuti (d. 1505),"[25] and so on, all of whose works form part of the Sunni canon[26] today. This is why we need to examine not just the methods by which Qur'ānic exegesis and religious meaning have been and continue to be produced, but also the extratextual contexts of their production.

Recent scholarship increasingly makes clear that conservative readings of the Qur'ān are a function of the methods Muslims have used—or have *failed* to use—to read it. In particular, argue critical scholars,[27] Muslims have not read the Qur'ān as both a "complex hermeneutic totality"[28] and as a "historically situated"[29] text. Instead, says Mustansir Mir (1986, 1), they have relied on a "linear-atomistic" method that takes a "verse-by-verse approach to the Qur'an. With most Muslim exegetes, the basic unit of Qur'an study is one or a few verses taken in isolation from the preceding and following verses." As a result, the Qur'ān is not read as a text possessing both "thematic *and* structural *nazm* [coherence]" (24). As Amina Wadud (1999, 2) also argues, the exegetes of the classical period

> begin with the first verse of the first chapter and proceed to the second verse of the first chapter—one verse at a time—until the end of the Book. Little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Qur'an to itself, thematically.

Even when they do refer to the relationship of two Āyāt, contends Wadud, they do so without applying any "hermeneutical principle" since a method "for linking similar Qur'anic ideas, syntactical structures, principles, or themes together is almost non-existent" (Wadud 1999, 2).

Not surprisingly, this method has failed to yield a creative synthesis of Qur'ānic principles,[30] since it does not recognize the connections between different themes in the Qur'ān. (As my reading will show, recognizing the Qur'ān's textual and thematic holism, and thus the hermeneutic connections between seemingly disparate themes, is absolutely integral to recovering its antipatriarchal epistemology.) By ignoring the fact that the Qur'ān is "a unified document gradually unfolding itself"[31] in time, classical exegetes have also ignored that in the Qur'ān content and context possess one

another[32] such that one cannot grasp the significance of the Qur'ān's teachings without considering the contexts of their revelation.

If we need to keep in mind the historical contexts of the Qur'ān's revelation in order to understand its teachings, we also need to keep in mind the historical contexts of its interpretations in order to understand its conservative and patriarchal exegesis. The most definitive work, not only in Qur'ānic exegesis but also in law and tradition, is considered by many Muslims to have been produced during the first few centuries of Muslim history, the Golden Age of Islam, which coincided with the Western Middle Ages.[33] The misogyny of this period is, of course, well known. It was assimilated[34] into Islam by way of the commentaries and super-commentaries on the Qur'ān (*Tafsīr*) and the narratives detailing the life and praxis of the Prophet (*Ahādith*) (Ahmed 1992; Spellberg 1994; Stowasser 1994). In other words, it was the secondary religious texts that enabled the "textualization of misogyny"[35] in Islam. These texts have come to eclipse the Qur'ān's influence in most Muslim societies today,[36] exemplifying the triumph not only of some texts over others in Muslim religious discourse but also of history, politics, and culture over the sacred text,[37] and thus also of the cross-cultural, transnational, and nondenominational ideologies on women and gender in vogue in the Middle Ages over the teachings of the Qur'ān. However, since we often do not distinguish between texts, cultures, and histories when studying Islam, we tend to ignore this inversion. As a result, we end up confusing the Qur'ān with its *Tafsīr,* and confusing Islam with patriarchy and the practices of repressive Muslim states that have a history of using Islam for their own political ends (Mernissi 1991, 1996; Khalidi 1994; Marlow 1997; Zaman 1997).

The fact that the Qur'ān "happens against a long background of patriarchal precedent"[38] may also explain why its exegesis, the work entirely of men, has been influenced by their own needs and experiences while either excluding or interpreting, "through the male vision, perspective, desire, or needs," women's experiences (Wadud 1999, 2). The resulting absence of women's voices from "the basic paradigms through which we examine and discuss the Qur'an and Qur'anic interpretation," argues Wadud, is mistaken "with voicelessness in the text itself"; and it is this silence that both explains and allows the striking consensus on women's issues among Muslims in spite of interpretive differences among them.

However, we know that women participated actively in the creation of religious knowledge in the early days of Islam. As Ahmed (1992, 72) says,

women of the Prophet's community felt they had a right "to comment forthrightly on any topic, even the Qur'an," and both God and the Prophet assumed their "right to speak out and readily responded to their comments." It is necessary, therefore, to reexamine the details of Muslim history, in particular the processes of knowledge formation, in order to understand women's exclusion from interpretive communities over time.

In sum, in order to understand patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān, we need to study the relationship not only between hermeneutics and history, but also between the content of knowledge and the methods by which it is generated. It is not "enough to ask *what* we know about religion, but equal attention must be paid to *how* we come to know what we know" (King 1995, 20; her emphasis). We need to realize that our understanding of the Qur'ān's teachings is contingent on how we have, or have not, read it; on the sorts of questions we have asked of it; and the voices we have preferred to hear in response to our questions. As such, if we want to read the Qur'ān in liberatory and antipatriarchal modes, we will need to use a different method to read it and also to ask different sorts of questions than we have been willing to ask thus far.

III. Reading Liberation

> **[E]njoin**
> **Thy people to hold fast**
> **By the best in the precepts**
>
> **The Qur'ān (7:145)** [39]

Readings of Islam as a religious patriarchy rest on a number of conceptual confusions. The most endemic of these is between the Qur'ān as revelation (Divine Discourse) and as text (a discourse fixed in writing[40] by humans and interpreted by them in time/space, that is, *historically*). However, collapsing God's Words with our interpretation of those Words not only violates the distinction Muslim theology has always made between Divine Speech and its "earthly realization," but it also ignores the Qur'ān's warning not to confuse it with its readings (39:18; in Ali 1988, 1241). It is crucial to make this distinction because there are slippages between the Qur'ān and its *Tafsīr,* and also within interpretations and translations of the Qur'ān (inter/intratextual tensions), which present scholars with a conundrum. As Neal Robinson (1996, 29) confesses, the "striking difference between what

can be safely inferred from the Qur'ān itself and what has frequently been read into it presents me with a serious dilemma." This disjuncture between the Qur'ān and its exegesis also explains why many norms and practices that are labeled "Islamic" do not, in fact, derive from the Qur'ān's teachings.[41] This is why we need to make another equally crucial distinction that patriarchal readings of Islam do not make: between Islam in theory and Islam in practice, thus also between Islam and already existing patriarchies on the one hand and Islam and Muslim history and practices on the other. Among others, W. C. Smith (1981, 30) argues in favor of such distinctions. "To reduce what Islam is, conceptually, to what Islam has been, historically, or is in the process of becoming," he says, "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." (As Smith notes, even the ideal of Islam has had a complex history and "has in some measure been different things in different centuries, in different countries, among different strata.") Although it is not always easy to make these distinctions—between Islam's actuality and its transcendent truth, between the Qur'ān and its exegesis, and between Islam and Muslim practices (thus between texts, cultures, and histories)—they nonetheless allow us to see that many ideas and practices, including the theme of patriarchy, ascribed to the Qur'ān do not originate in it or have been read into the text in contextually problematic ways.

This only becomes clear, however, if we begin by defining patriarchy itself, which no reader of the Qur'ān seems ever to have done, including those feminists who condemn Islam as a patriarchy. Even Wadud (1999, 9), who argues that the Qur'ān is neutral toward "social [and] marital patriarchy," does not say what she means by the term. This may explain why she remains unaware that her own work helps to establish the Qur'ān's *anti*patriarchal episteme by showing that it does not privilege males *as* males (sex is irrelevant to its definition of moral agency), it does not use males as a paradigm to define women, and it does not even use the concept of gender to speak about humans. In the absence of a definition of patriarchy, one cannot know that the Qur'ān's treatment of these themes undermines the very core of patriarchal ideology. This is why I begin my own reading by defining patriarchy.

Defining Patriarchy

I define patriarchy in both a narrow (specific) and a broad (universal) sense in order to make the definition as comprehensive as possible. Narrowly de-

fined, patriarchy is a historically specific mode of rule by fathers[42] that, in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real as well as symbolic continuum between the "Father/fathers";[43] that is, between a patriarchalized view of God as Father/male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband's claim to rule over his wife and children. I apply this definition in reading the Qur'ān because the Qur'ān was revealed in the context of a traditional patriarchy, and my aim is to see if it endorsed this mode of patriarchy by representing God as Father or by representing the father or husband as ruler over his wife and children.

Since the Qur'ān's teachings are universal and since father's rule has reconstituted itself, I also define patriarchy more broadly, as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by "transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other' " (Eisenstein 1984, 90).[44] Patriarchy, broadly conceived, is based in an ideology that ascribes social/sexual inequalities to biology; that is, it confuses sexual/biological *differences* with gender dualisms/*inequality* (differences based on sex or biology with inequality based on gender dualisms). This "culturalization of nature and the naturalization of culture"[45] manifests itself in three claims (as the conservative Muslim position summarized above reveals): that there are essential ontological and ethical-moral differences between women and men, that these differences are a function of nature/biology, and that the Qur'ān's different, hence unequal, treatment of women and men affirms their inherent inequality (in a series of steps, difference is thus transformed into inequality). In reading the Qur'ān in light of this definition of patriarchy, my aim is to see whether it endorses the ideas of sex/gender differentiation, dualisms, and inequalities that are implicit in these claims.

While a definition of patriarchy is fundamental to being able to establish the Qur'ān as an antipatriarchal (or, for that matter, as a patriarchal) text, and also for explaining issues of con/textuality (the relationship between texts and the contexts of their reading), it does not address the problem of con/textual legitimacy or the question of what constitutes a proper reading of a text. In fact, I am convinced that one of the primary reasons Muslims have failed to recover the Qur'ān's antipatriarchal epistemology has to do with the fact that we have not systematically addressed this question, particularly in light of the Qur'ān's own recommended modes of reading it. Indeed, I believe that the failure to consider the criteria for generating a contextually legitimate reading of the Qur'ān is not just a *hermeneutic* failure,

but also a *theological* one. Inasmuch as readings of Scriptures are as likely to be influenced by theological considerations, especially by one's conception of God, as they are by the use of specific methodological criteria, focusing only on the latter to the exclusion of how a Scripture is experienced within the context of a distinctive image of, and relationship to God, whose Speech it is, cannot be the best way to generate contextually appropriate readings of it. Yet, that is how Muslims have, in fact, tended to read the Qur'ān historically: without making God's Self-Disclosure the hermeneutic site from which to read the Qur'ān. The failure to connect God to God's Speech (which has resulted in some extremely objectionable readings of the Qur'ān) is inexplicable in view of the fact that the organizing principle of Islam, the doctrine of God's Unity (*Tawhīd*), stipulates that there is a perfect congruence between God (Divine Ontology) and God's Speech (Divine Discourse). This means that Muslims should seek the hermeneutic keys for interpreting the Qur'ān in the nature of Divine Ontology or, more appropriately, in the nature of Divine Self-Disclosure, since our knowledge of one is contingent on our understanding of the other. That is where I locate my own hermeneutics.

Defining a Qur'ānic Hermeneutics

Given the unity of Divine Ontology and Divine Discourse, we need to begin our reading of God's Speech by connecting it to God. Thus, God's Self-Disclosure needs to become intrinsic to any project of Qur'ānic hermeneutics. Here I examine three aspects of God's Self-Disclosure that generate liberatory readings of the Qur'ān: the principles of Divine Unity, Justness, and Incomparability.[46]

The principle of God's Unity (*Tawhīd*) has the most far-reaching implications for how we understand God and God's Speech. Here, I wish to note only its implications for a theory of male rule/privilege that underpins traditional patriarchies. In its simplest form, *Tawhīd* symbolizes the idea of God's Indivisibility, hence also the indivisibility of God's Sovereignty; thus, no theory of male (or popular) sovereignty that pretends to be an extension of God's Rule/Sovereignty, or comes into conflict with it, can be considered compatible with the doctrine of *Tawhīd.* In fact, this is the axiomatic meaning of the term: that God is absolute Sovereign and no one can partake in God's Sovereignty. To the extent that theories of male rule over women and children amount to asserting sovereignty over both and also misrepresent males as intermediaries between women and God, they do come into

conflict with the essential tenets of the doctrine of *Tawhīd* and must be rejected as theologically unsound. A reading of the Qur'ān that suggests even subtle parallels between God and males, in their capacity as fathers or husbands, must then be rejected as an insufferable heresy. (In later chapters, I show how the doctrine of *Tawhīd* directly undermines theories of father-rule/right.)

A second foundational principle of God's Self-Disclosure is that although "severe, strict and unrelenting [in] justice," God "never does any *zulm* to anybody" (Izutsu 1964, 77, 129). To do *Zulm* (in the Qur'ān), Toshihiko Izutsu (1959, 152) points out, is " 'to act in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person.' " Divine Justice thus is self-circumscribed by respect for the rights of humans as moral agents. However, if God never does *Zulm* to anyone, then God's Speech (the Qur'ān) also cannot teach *Zulm* against anyone. That is, if "God by definition, cannot be a misogynist,"[47] then God's Speech also cannot by definition be misogynist, or teach misogyny or injustice.

Clearly, reasonable people may disagree about what constitutes *Zulm,* as also about the proper definition of human rights. However, it is harder to argue that theories asserting the incomplete humanity of any group of people or justifying their physical or moral abuse and degradation do not violate the rights of that group and therefore do not constitute *Zulm.* In this context, it may be argued that by teaching the precept of the inherent inferiority of women, which breeds misogyny, and by justifying women's subordination to men, patriarchies violate women's rights by denying them agency and dignity, principles that the Qur'ān says are intrinsic to human nature itself. As such, we can think of patriarchies as being manifest cases of *Zulm,* and to the extent that that is so, we must be willing to assume, again as a hermeneutic principle, that the Qur'ān cannot condone them. (As I will argue, the Qur'ān's teachings challenge inequality and patriarchy in more concrete ways as well.) An exegesis that reads oppression, inequality, and patriarchy into the Qur'ān should be seen as a misreading, a failure in reading, since it attributes to God *Zulm* against women. What we may, out of either historical habit or expedience, read as Qur'ānic support for women's subordination to men must then be reexamined in light of a more ecumenical definition of *Zulm* that coheres with the totality of the Qur'ān's teachings about the equality of the sexes. (I consider these issues in detail in Chapters 4–6.)

A third principle of God's Self-Disclosure with hermeneutic implica-

tions is that God is Incomparable, hence Unrepresentable, especially in anthropomorphic terms. The Qur'ān's tireless and emphatic rejections of God's sexualization/engenderment—as Father (male)—confirm that God is not a male, or like one. However, if God is not male or like one, there also is no reason to hold that God has any special affinity with males (the positing of such an affinity allows men to claim God as their own and thus to project onto God sexual partisanship). Not only should we recover the liberatory potential of Islam's rejection of a patriarchalized God, we should also make it the *hermeneutic site* from which to read the Qur'ān's antipatriarchal epistemology. (I make this argument more fully in Chapter 4.)

All three aspects of Divine Ontology are far more nuanced and have far richer implications than I have explored here. However, even a cursory exploration reveals that the liberatory nature of Qur'ānic epistemology inheres in the very nature of God's Being. In other words, it is not only in the Qur'ān's teachings about human creation, ontology, and relationships that we can find liberatory potential but also in the very nature of Divine Ontology itself.

In addition to these theological principles, the Qur'ān also offers us specific methodological criteria for reading it that emphasize the principles of textual holism, reading for the best meanings, and using analytical reasoning in interpretation. The Qur'ān's emphasis on reading it as a textual unity emerges from its warning that "Those who break the Qur'an into parts. Them, by thy Lord, We shall question, every one, Of what they used to do" (15:91–93; in Pickthall n.d., 194). Yusuf Ali (1988) translates this verse (in which God is addressing the Prophet) as:

> And say: "I am indeed he
> That warneth openly
> And without ambiguity,"—
>
> (Of just such wrath)
> As We sent down
> On those who divided
> (Scripture into arbitrary parts),—
>
> (So also on such)
> As have made [the] Qur'an
> Into shreds (as they please).

Therefore, by the [*Rabb*],[48]
We will, of a surety,
Call them to account,
For all their deeds.

The Qur'ān (15:89–93; in Ali, 653)

Similarly, in a reference to the Book given to Moses, God condemns those who make "it into (Separate) sheets for show, While ye conceal much (Of its contents)" (6:91; in Ali, 314). The Qur'ān's warning against reading it in a decontextualized, selective, and piecemeal way emerges also from its criticism of the Israelites who broke their covenant with God: "They change the words From their (right) places And forget a good part Of the Message that was Sent them" (5:14; in Ali, 245). And, again, they "change the words From their (right) times And places" (5:44; in Ali, 255). Revelation, the Qur'ān emphasizes, is of a continuity and is also internally clear and self-consistent (39:23; in Ali, 1243–44).

The Qur'ān's internal coherence and consistency do not, however, preclude us from deriving multiple meanings from it, including ones that may not be appropriate. Thus, while noting its own polysemy, the Qur'ān also confirms that some meanings, thus some readings, are better than others. For instance, it praises "Those who listen To the Word And follow The best (meaning) in it" (39:18; in Ali, 1241), clearly indicating that we can derive more than one set of meanings from the Qur'ān, not all of which may be equally good. Similarly, God tells Moses to "enjoin Thy people to hold fast By the best in the precepts [i.e., the Tablets given to him]" (7:145; in Ali, 383). (God also tells the Prophet and all believers to reason with unbelievers in the best possible way.) While it may not be easy to say what would be the best meaning of every Āyah—especially given the (sufi) view that each verse in the Qur'ān can be read in up to 60,000 ways—in light of our idea of a Just God and of the Qur'ān's concern for justice, it is reasonable to hold that the best meanings would recover justice (fairness, impartiality) broadly conceived. However, even if one cannot agree on what the best meanings in every case may be, it is less easy to feign ignorance of what is *not* appropriate inasmuch as the Qur'ān makes this clear in different contexts. First, as noted, it criticizes readings that are decontextualized and selective. The Qur'ān's emphasis on reading it holistically, hence intratextually, also emerges from its praise for those who say " 'We believe In the Book; the whole of it Is from our Lord' " (3:7; in Ali, 123).

Second, the Qur'ān distinguishes between readings that draw on its foundational (clear) Āyāt and those that draw on its allegorical (obscure) Āyāt. The Qur'ān criticizes those who ignore its "basic or fundamental" Āyāt, with their "established meaning," in order to focus on the "allegorical [Āyāt], Seeking discord, and searching For its hidden meanings" (3:7; in Ali, 123). While allegory has crucial didactic functions in the Qur'ān, it is not meant to obscure the Qur'ān's meanings, which, says the Qur'ān, are clear. Third, the Qur'ān states repeatedly that God does not love wrongdoing and oppression. As I have asserted, we can disagree on what constitutes oppression, but reading into the Qur'ān various forms of *Zulm* as defined by its *victims* cannot be considered legitimate. It is thus reasonable to hold that con/textually legitimate readings will cohere with the overall moral objective of the Qur'ān's teachings, treat the text as a unity, privilege its clear and foundational Āyāt over its allegorical ones, and seek to avoid ambiguity.

In the end, of course, a reading of the Qur'ān is just a reading of the Qur'ān, no matter how good; it does not approximate the Qur'ān itself, which may be why the Qur'ān distinguishes between itself and its exegesis. Thus, it condemns those "who write The Book with their own hands, And then say: 'This is from God' " (2:79; in Ali, 38). While the Āyah was a warning to those among the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) of the Prophet's time who were engaged in forgeries, it serves also as a warning against confusing Divine Discourse with its interpretations. In this context, the Qur'ān is clear that "those who are bent on denying the truth attribute their own lying inventions to God. And most of them never use their reason" (5:105; in Asad 1980, 166). People not only fabricate false meanings, says the Qur'ān, but they also project into Scripture their own desires. As one Āyah says, "And there are among them Illiterates, who know not the Book, But (see therein their own) desires, And they do nothing but conjecture" (2:78; in Ali, 38). For all these reasons, then, we need to read the Qur'ān carefully and scrupulously and without the hubris of believing that we can exhaust its meanings.

Finally, the Qur'ān also comments on its own revelation in Arabic and clarifies that it is in Arabic because the Prophet was an Arab; God wanted the Arabs, to whom no "warner" had been sent before, to understand and heed God's teachings, and God wanted to make the Qur'ān easy for them to understand and remember. The Qur'ān does not suggest, however, that Arabic has any unique or intrinsic merit as a language of revelation, or that it is the only language in which we can understand revelation. Rather, argues Izutsu (1964, 189), the Qur'ānic view of the Arabic language is based in

> the very clear cultural consciousness that each nation has its own language, and Arabic is the language of the Arabs, and it is, in this capacity, only one of many languages. If God chose this language, it was not for its intrinsic value as a language but simply for its usefulness, that is because the message was addressed primarily to the Arabic speaking people.

What seems significant is not so much the language in which the Qur'ān's teachings are conveyed as the need for us "to *discover*" its meanings by exercising our own reason and intellect (Hourani 1985; his emphasis). Ziauddin Sardar (1985, 167) points out that, compared to 260 Āyāt on legislative issues, there are some 750 that instruct believers to "reflect [and] make the best use of reason" in trying to decipher the Qur'ān's polyvalent semiotic universe.

The principles found within the Qur'ān reveal a preference for reading the text as "a cumulative, holistic process,"[49] that is, as "a whole, a totality."[50] Traditional Muslim views that the Qur'ān is "its own best interpreter"[51] and that we need to "interpret the Qur'an by the Qur'an"[52] are hermeneutic principles implicit in the Qur'ān itself, which suggests textual holism as the basis of "intrascriptural investigation."[53] However, the Qur'ān also "clearly enjoins an understanding of itself which makes 'contextuality' central and fundamental, both to its existence and its relevance" (Cragg 1994, 113). The best method, then, would be to read the Qur'ān intratextually but also with regard to the contexts of its revelation.[54] Beyond these broad principles, the Qur'ān does not "authorise recourse to methods of explanation or logical deduction for the purpose of better understanding" it, observes Faruq Sherif (1985, 42); however, as he notes, it does not "forbid the use of such expedients," either.

In sum, the Qur'ān itself offers criteria by which we can judge between readings, which is important to do because even though "multiple readings are not per se mutually exclusive, not all interpretations are thereby equal" (Trible in West 1995, 149). A commitment to textual polysemy thus does not mean having to embrace moral relativism. In this context, scholars maintain that "an interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another," and that reading the text as a unity enhances this probability inasmuch as a text is "a limited field of possible constructions" (Ricoeur 1981, 213). In fact, texts themselves can "resist imposed interpretations" in their details (Wolterstorff 1995, 202); as a noted biblical scholar once put it, "You can revise the text to suit yourself only just so far" (Frei in ibid., 230). Moreover, if we cannot agree on which is the best inter-

pretation, we should be able to "agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimated" (Eco in Carson 1996, 76–77). At the very least, we should be willing to agree that "[t]heologically speaking, whatever diminishes and denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine" (West 1995, 110).

IV. Entering the Hermeneutic Circle/Spiral

Since we always bring what Martin Heidegger called "pre-understanding"[55] into all interpretive processes, I would like to clarify my epistemology, methodology, and reading practices here. I also speculate on how some readers are likely to respond to my work partly in the hope of encouraging them to move beyond their preconceptions and biases.[56]

On Epistemology

I read the Qur'ān as a "believing woman," to borrow a term from the Qur'ān itself. This means that I do not question its ontological status as Divine Speech or the claim that God Speaks, both of which Muslims hold to be true. I do, however, question the legitimacy of its patriarchal readings, and I do this on the basis of a distinction in Muslim theology between what God says and what we understand God to be saying. In the latter context, I am especially interested in querying the claim, implicit in confusing the Qur'ān with its patriarchal exegesis, that only males, and conservative males at that, know what God *really* means. It is this claim that I believe underwrites sexual oppression in Muslim societies and therefore needs to be contested.

As a believer, I also look to the Qur'ān, rather than to Western texts and theories, for my understanding of concepts like sexual equality. However, while the Qur'ān's concern with equality and rights prefigures modern, Western, and feminist discourses, it is grounded in a very different ethics and epistemology and is conveyed by means of a very different language than the latter. In using terms like patriarchy, hermeneutics, and sexual/textual, I do not wish to misrepresent the Qur'ān as a feminist text; rather, the use of such terminology shows my own intellectual disposition and biases.

It also is from the Qur'ān and from Muslim tradition that I draw inspiration for my critical engagement with the text itself. The Qur'ān's counsel to believers to use our reason/ing and knowledge to decipher its Āyāt (lit-

erally, Signs of God) opens the way for all believers to engage in critical inquiry. Indeed, Muslim tradition records that this is a legacy we inherited from a woman at the start of our history. Thus, some fourteen centuries ago Umm Salama is said to have asked her husband, the Prophet Muhammad, why God was not addressing women directly in the Qur'ān, then in the process of being revealed to him.[57] Perhaps she was concerned at the number of Āyāt addressed to men, or perhaps she did not take the Qur'ān's references to men to be inclusive of women, even though in Arabic that is often the case. In any event, that is how—says tradition—the Qur'ān became the only Scripture to address women as women. As a believer, I interpret this incident to mean not that a woman corrected God, but rather that, by God's Grace, Umm Salama's critique became the way for God to correct an entire community.

I draw several lessons from this incident. First, I learn that long before we came to define the term "critical," and long before we came to study the relationship between language and forms of human subjectivity, some premodern, illiterate Muslim women were thinking critically about the role of language in shaping their sense of self. Were that not true, I assume Umm Salama would not have asked her question, and I assume God would not have responded to her by making women the subjects, rather than the objects, of Divine Discourse. In fact, as the Qur'ān makes clear, God shaped not only the language of Divine Discourse but also its content in light of women's concerns as they themselves expressed these during the process of its revelation. More importantly, I learn that "*women too* are among those oppressed whom God comes to vindicate and liberate,"[58] and that, in Islam, they have a direct relationship with God which is not dependent upon the mediation of male authority. Finally, and most significantly, I learn that for Divine Speech to be responsive to us, we should be willing to engage it critically by asking the right sorts of questions of it.

Even though as a woman I ask some questions of the Qur'ān that a man may not perhaps think of asking, and even though I believe that women are more likely than men to read the Qur'ān for liberation (because women and men have different stakes in patriarchy and thus also in liberation from it), I do not rule out the possibility that both women and men are equally capable of liberatory readings. We may not always share the same idea of liberation, of course, but I would like to believe that disagreements are a function not of sexual but of intellectual and ideological differences. This is not to say that different experiences of sex/gender play no role in struc-

turing our ideas; nor does it mean that sex/gender is not a site for creating, subverting, and critiquing meaning. It is merely to affirm the possibility for women and men to arrive at a mutually shared discourse of meanings in spite of sex/gender differences. Thus, I do not adhere to a deterministic view of the relationship between sex/gender and reading. This may sound counterintuitive, given the example of Umm Salama I have just cited, and it certainly is an unstylish view to hold at a time when we are becoming ever more aware of the phallocratic nature of language and its role in constituting gendered subjectivities. However, the very fact that men's exegesis influences women's understanding of religion, as also the fact that language allows for its own contestation, testifies to the autonomy of meanings and language from sex/gender. Moreover, the Qur'ān also assumes that a shared discourse of meaning and mutual care is not only possible but also necessary for the development of moral individualities and communities. I do not therefore valorize communities of women readers as the sine qua non of liberatory readings, as feminists do. To me, the fact that both men and women can produce patriarchal readings or liberatory ones is an acknowledgment of the relationship between texts and the contexts of their reading (or between discourses and materiality) and an argument against biological essentialism.

On Methodology

I employ the hermeneutic principles the Qur'ān suggests for its own interpretation as outlined above, to read the Qur'ān as text, as well as to read behind it and in front of it. When I say I read the Qur'ān as text, I mean that I read it to discover what God may have intended (that is, for Authorial intent discourse).[59] This means that I ascribe intention/ality to the text. I also read to uncover what I believe already is there in the Qur'ān; that is, I hold that certain meanings are intrinsic to the text such that anyone can retrieve them if they employ the right method and ask the right questions. This means, of course, that I accept the possibility that men and women can read in similar ways, even though we may have a stake in reading differently.

Breaking with another feminist tradition, I also do not read the Qur'ān as a dual-gendered text, that is, a text that has both male and female voices in it. For Muslims, the Qur'ān is God's Speech and not the work of human authors, and God is beyond sex/gender. (It could well be, of course, that men and women tend to interpret the Qur'ān's message differently. Also, since access to Divine Discourse is mediated by humans and in gendered lan-

guages, and since the humans who have interpreted the Qur'ān historically have been men, we can certainly hear male voices and masculinist biases in exegesis.) When I say, therefore, that the Qur'ān is not a patriarchal text, I am not saying that it is not the work of men, since I hold that to be a priori true; what I am saying is that its teachings challenge the premises that sustain patriarchy in both its traditional and modern forms. Similarly, when I refer to the Qur'ān's egalitarian "voice," I am not referring to female voices in it that only I can hear as a woman. I am referring to tendencies in the Qur'ān that have been submerged or lost because of the patriarchal nature of its exegesis and the gendered nature of human language.

Given the limitations of language, I occasionally question the translation of a specific word, or the use of a phrase by means of which a crucial idea is conveyed, since much can rest on a word or a turn of the phrase. For instance, the Qur'ān states that God is Unrepresentable and that we should not use similitudes (representations) for God. I thus take the use of the pronoun "He" to be a bad linguistic convention and not an epistemological claim about God's Being. However, more than querying language use, I focus on uncovering the hermeneutic connections between seemingly disparate themes in the Qur'ān (e.g., between the nature of God's Self-Disclosure and the Qur'ān's opposition to ideas of father-right/rule as well as to theories of sexual differentiation) that allow me to recover its anti-patriarchal epistemology.

In this context, I concentrate not only on what the Qur'ān says but also on what it does *not* say; that is, I view silence as symbolically suggestive since the "unsaid, the assumed, and the silences in any discourse provide . . . the backdrop against which meaning is established" (Denzin 1997, 38). Of course, what one makes of the Qur'ān's silences depends on what one makes of silence itself; in law, we treat silence as consent, but it can be rather more complex and can convey opposition, resistance, neutrality, indifference, and so on, depending on the context. Thus, I interpret the Qur'ān's silences in light of its expressed teachings.

To read behind the text means to reconstruct the historical "context from which the text emerged" (West 1995, 113). This is important because, as scholars maintain with respect to the Bible, patriarchalization was "not inherent in Christian revelation and community, but progressed slowly and with difficulty." Furthermore, "definitions of sexual roles and gender dimorphism are the outcome of the social economic interactions between men and women [and were] not ordained either by nature or by God"

(Schussler-Fiorenza in West, 143, 144). This is equally true of Muslim attitudes toward women, which is why I begin by examining the historical contexts in which the Qur'ān was revealed and read and the means by which its teachings came to be overlaid by a patriarchal exegesis (discussed in Part I).

To read in front of the text, on the other hand, means to recontextualize it in the light of present needs, something that requires a double movement, as Rahman (1982, 5) calls it, from the present to the past and back to the present. The first half of the movement allows one to specify the contexts of the Qur'ān's revelation and teachings, and the second to distill their "moral-social" principles so as to make them applicable today. However, as Rahman (85) says, it is "precisely the systematic working-out of Islam for the modern context" that has not occurred even though the Qur'ān can be adapted to such contexts, including those of women. In fact, interpreting it with them in mind would confirm its universality, according to Wadud. Part II of this book is thus my way of reading in front of the text.

On Reading

What I offer here is both a hermeneutic method for reading the Qur'ān and a holistic and thematically linked interpretation of its teachings. I am not offering my own translation of the Qur'ān. To speak of the Qur'ān in any language other than Arabic is, of course, to speak of it in its translations, and while translating the Qur'ān raises complex problems,[60] it is unavoidable if one wishes to speak of it in a different language, as I do.

Accordingly, I rely primarily on Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, which Muslims almost universally[61] regard as being the best. Occasionally, where I believe they serve as useful correctives to Ali, I also draw on Muhammad Asad, A. J. Arberry, and M. M. Pickthall, all of whose works Muslims consider to be among the finest in English. The only change I make on occasion to these translations is to use the Arabic word *"Rabb"* for God (which the Qur'ān itself uses) instead of the English "He/His" since I wish to retain sex/gender-neutral references to God for reasons I will explain in Chapter 4. Less frequently, I give some words in their original Arabic instead of their English translations, especially when translators differ in their interpretation of these words. Nevertheless, I hope to show that in all of its translations, even by men, the Qur'ān remains a liberatory text.

Although my choices of translation, as well as my reading, involve "some kind of modulation or interpretive process"[62] such that it is unrealistic to claim total objectivity, this does not mean that the choices or the reading

are entirely biased or illusory. The fact that a reading can never be wholly objective does not, in itself, render it false; in other words, subjectivity does not rule out the possibility of saying something that also is true. As theorists argue with respect to the hermeneutic circle (i.e., the problem of preunderstanding in structuring our encounter with a text), the reader's aim should not be to avoid getting into it, but to get "into it properly," recognizing the role of the forestructure of understanding in interpretation (Bleicher 1980, 103). In terms of this argument, subjectivity "is not so much what initiates understanding as what terminates it" (Ricoeur 1981, 113). (In other words, it is the *limitations* of my reading that most clearly reveal the influence of subjective factors.) Ideally, argues Paul Ricoeur (143), rather than imposing ourselves on the text, we "unrealize" ourselves in front of it, "receiving from it an enlarged self." As such, awareness of subjectivity can foster a critical hermeneutic self-consciousness that can lead to better self-knowledge and thus to more meaningful engagements with texts, transforming the hermeneutic circle into what D. A. Carson (1996) calls a hermeneutic spiral.

Many Muslims, however, are of two views with regard to the role of subjectivity. On the one hand, they hold that modern readings of the Qur'ān, especially by women, are tainted by biases, while on the other they embrace the religious knowledge produced by a small number of male scholars in the classical period as the only objective and authentic knowledge of Islam. Belief in the "theoretical infallibility"[63] of these male scholars and the idea that the knowledge they produced transcends its own historicity arises in, and also gives rise to, a view of imaginary time that serves to draw Muslims close to what is distant from us in real time and to distance us from that which, in real time, is close to us. As such, the denial of historicity in one case and its affirmation in the other defines acceptable and unacceptable modes of reading the Qur'ān among conservatives. This mindset, which allows "the burden of decision and discrimination to be taken off [our] shoulders by tradition,"[64] encourages Muslims to adhere to exegetical practices designed to find out how texts "were read when they were new" (Jackson 1989, 3). Hence we have the Muslim emphasis on tradition, especially in exegesis. Lately, however, Muslim scholars have begun querying the methods used to read the Qur'ān, the *Tafsīr* these methods have generated, and the processes by which Muslim tradition itself was constructed, opening the way for new scholarship on, and readings of, the Qur'ān (Mir 1986; Rahman 1965, 1980; Wadud 1999). My work is situated within these

new revisions of Muslim tradition and attempts to synthesize the old with the new. My work remains traditional in its view of the Qur'ān as an egalitarian text, a view I share with some Muslim exegetes of the classical period and certainly with many Muslims today. It also is traditional in that I read the Qur'ān in terms of its own "intrinsic sense" and truth claims. However, my work is new in that I apply new insights to read the Qur'ān on issues that exegetes have not examined (its position on patriarchy and sexual equality as we define them today). Thus, the way in which I frame the reading itself is novel from the perspective of Muslim tradition. And, of course, what is new is the temporality of the site from which I read the Qur'ān.

Were I not reading the Qur'ān, I would not need to defend, in this heyday of postmodernism, the newness of the insights that I apply to read it, or the reading itself. Yet, contemporary readings of the Qur'ān, especially liberatory ones, run the risk of being dismissed a priori because of the belief (shared by conservative Muslims, many non-Muslims, feminists, and unreconstructed Orientalists) that the Qur'ān's meanings have been fixed once and for all as immutably patriarchal and that one cannot develop a new way of reading it that incorporates theories and insights that have matured twelve or so centuries after its own advent. However, applying new insights to read the Qur'ān is both unavoidable and justified. It is unavoidable because one always reads in and from the present; it thus is impossible not to bring to one's reading sensibilities shaped by existing ideas, debates, concerns, and anxieties. Indeed, if we are to read before the text (recontextualize it for each new generation of Muslims), we *must* bring new insights to our reading. Interpreting the Qur'ān in light of new insights is also legitimate inasmuch as Islam is not bound by space, time, or context; it should thus be possible to ask if, and how, the Qur'ān's teachings address or accommodate ideas we find to be true or compelling today. Even if we do not agree with these ideas, we need to take them seriously if we wish to argue against them. This is another way of saying that dissent, to be meaningful, must contend seriously with the discursive and moral-ethical frameworks it seeks to challenge in order to demonstrate its own value. That is partly what has prompted my own engagement with Western/feminist theories, many of which serve as helpful points of departure, that is, as "a starting point and an act of divergence, of moving away"[65] for my work. However, while I draw on both Western and Muslim theories to make my argument, I do not pretend that it is possible, or even desirable, to attempt a synthesis between Qur'ānic and Western epistemology.

v. Plan of the Book

This book consists of two parts, each of which engages a different problematic; it therefore lends itself to a nonlinear reading. Those new to the subject might benefit from reading from front to back; those more familiar with the subject might want to begin with Part II.

Part I consists of Chapters 2 and 3, which together explain the nature of texts, textualities, and inter/extratextuality in Muslim religious discourse. In Chapter 2 I discuss the primary religious texts of Islam, the relationship between specific interpretive practices (method) and specific readings of the Qur'ān (meaning), and different conceptualizations of the relationship between texts, time, and method. In particular, I focus on differing views of sacred and secular time and explain how these shape our understanding of the Qur'ān's teachings, taking as an example conservative exegesis of the verses on "the veil."

In Chapter 3 I extend my exploration of textualities to an analysis of the relationship within and between texts (intertextuality) on the one hand, and the role of extratextual contexts (the state, law, and tradition) in shaping Muslim religious discourse, on the other. Here I consider how definitions of the canon, and of knowledge itself, shaped Qur'ānic exegesis. I also examine the roles of the state and of interpretive communities in the early stages of Muslim history in influencing the processes by which method, meaning, and memory were constructed. In this context, I focus in particular on how exegetical communities came to link their own commentarial practices to those ascribed to the Prophet and, in time, to elevate their commentaries over revelation itself, a method that has put a closure on how Muslims can "legitimately" read the Qur'ān today. Inasmuch as this method displaces Divine Discourse, negates the principle of scriptural polysemy, inhibits the development of new interpretive paradigms, and closes off the Qur'ān to new communities of readers (especially women), I question its sacralization as "Islamic."

Part II comprises Chapters 4 through 6. In Chapter 4, I examine the nature of Divine Self-Disclosure in the Qur'ān, since sexual hierarchies and theories of father/husband rule in religious patriarchies derive from representations of God as Father/male. My aim is to show that characterizations of Islam as a religion of the Father/fathers are misguided inasmuch as they ignore the Qur'ān's unyielding rejection of the patriarchal imaginary of God-the-Father and the prophets-as-fathers, as well as its sustained

critique of the history of rule by fathers. I illustrate this claim by rereading the Qur'ānic narratives of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad, which I interpret as dis-placing father/male rule in favor of God's Rule and Sovereignty.

Chapter 5 analyzes the Qur'ān's approach to sex/gender and sexuality and argues that while the Qur'ān recognizes biological (sexual) *differences,* it does not espouse a view of sex/gender *differentiation,* or gender dualisms. That is, the Qur'ān does not endow sex (biology), or difference itself, with symbolic meaning. As such, it is difficult to derive a theory of gender, much less of gender inequality, from its teachings. To the contrary, the Qur'ān establishes the principle of the ontic equality of the sexes and it does so in a manner that is distinctive from both the one-sex and the two-sex models on which Western patriarchal thought draws. My reading shows that not only do the Qur'ān's teachings have nothing in common with either model but also that the Qur'ān treats issues of sexual sameness and difference in a totally different way than the two models do. I end by discussing the Qur'ān's attitude to sexuality and show that it does not distinguish between men and women based on their sexual identities. In fact, I argue that the Qur'ān assumes that men and women have similar sexual natures and needs and that its precepts about sexual modesty and morality apply equally to both.

This argument extends into my analysis, in Chapter 6, of the family in the Qur'ān. Here I consider its position on mothers and fathers and on wives and husbands, and I distinguish it from both (Western) patriarchal and feminist thought. Among other things, I demonstrate that the Qur'ān's view of mothers and fathers and its definition of parental responsibilities is completely at odds with patriarchal theories. Similarly, its definition of spousal relationships differs markedly from their conceptualization in and by patriarchies inasmuch as it confirms the principle of the equality, equivalence, sameness, or similarity (depending on the context) of the spouses, notwithstanding specific verses on polygyny, divorce, and "wife beating." In sum, these chapters aim to emphasize those aspects of the Qur'ān's teachings that are conducive to theorizing sexual equality. I feel this is important to do in view of the fact that Muslim women today find it hard to struggle for equality from within an Islamic framework because of the assumption that equality is a Western, not an Islamic, value.

I end this work by means of a postscript in which I consider whether texts are responsible for their own (mis)reading; that is, contrary to what I have

argued, are patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān a function of the text itself? This is my way of reflecting on the appropriateness of my entire project.

Since each chapter employs concepts specific to the argument I make in it, I explain the concepts in the relevant chapters. This necessarily places on readers the burden of patience and a willingness to read an argument in its entirety before evaluating it.

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